

STAR
WARSTM



**Lost Tribe of the Sith:
The Collected Stories**

John Jackson Miller



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Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: The Collected Stories is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #1: Precipice

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #2: Skyborn

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #3: Paragon

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #4: Savior

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #5: Purgatory

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #6: Sentinel

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #7: Pantheon

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #8: Secrets

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This book is not to be sold or distributed!

To Jack and Josie,
my own little Tribe

Acknowledgements

The nine *Fate of the Jedi* novels by Aaron Allston, Christie Golden, and Troy Denning introduced a Lost Tribe of the Sith, marooned on the planet Kesh, and discovered in Luke Skywalker's time. The *Lost Tribe of the Sith* project told the history of that Sith society through a series of e-book short stories; those appear here, with a new novella appearing for the first time. My thanks go to Del Rey editor Shelly Shapiro and former Lucasfilm fiction editor Sue Rostoni for bringing me the project, and to Aaron, Christie, and Troy for developing the background materials that became the basis for these stories. My appreciation goes to David Pomerico, Frank Parisi, Erich Schoeneweiss, and everyone at Random House who helped bring the Lost Tribe to both print and electronic life. To read more adventures of the Lost Tribe, look for the Fate of the Jedi novels, now available in hardcover and mass market paperback. And find new stories in Lost Tribe of the Sith comic books available from Dark Horse Comics.

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25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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STAR WARS: A New Hope

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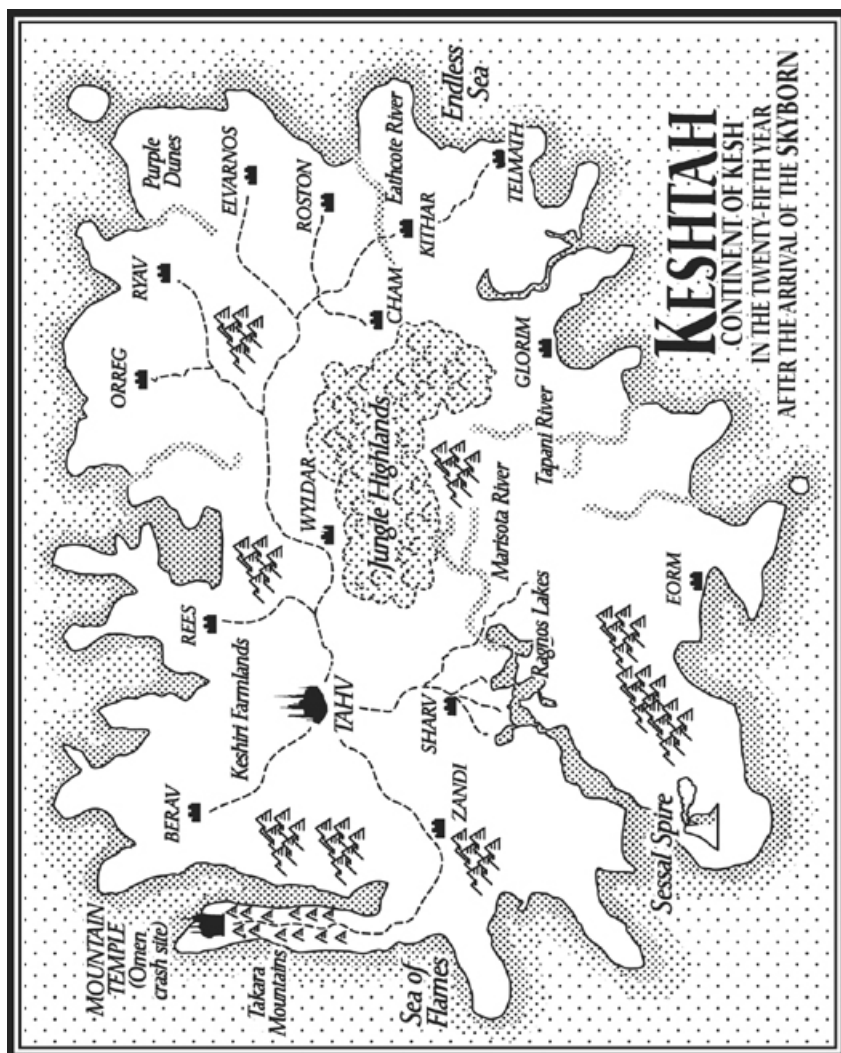
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KESHIAH

CONTINENT OF KESH

IN THE TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR
AFTER THE ARRIVAL OF THE SKYBORN

Precipice

Chapter One

5,000 years BBY

“Lohjoy! Give me something!” Scrambling to his feet in the darkness, Captain Korsin craned his neck to find the hologram. “Thrusters, attitude control—I’ll even take *parking jets!*”

A starship is a weapon, but it’s the crew that makes it deadly. An old spacer’s line: trite, but weighty enough to lend a little authority. Korsin had used it himself on occasion. But not today. His ship was being deadly all on its own—and his crew was just along for the ride.

“We’ve got nothing, Captain!” The serpent-haired engineer Lohjoy flickered before him, off-kilter and out of focus. Korsin knew things belowdecks must be bad if his upright, uptight Ho’Din genius was off-balance. “Reactors are down! And we’ve got structural failures in the hull, both aft and—”

Lohjoy shrieked in agony, her tendrils bursting into a mane of fire that sent her reeling out of view. Korsin barely suppressed a startled laugh. In calmer times—half a standard hour ago—he’d joked that Ho’Din were half

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tree. But that was hardly appropriate when the whole engineering deck was going up. The hull had ruptured. Again.

The hologram expired—and all around the stocky captain warning lights danced, winked, and went out. Korsin plopped down again, clutching at the armrests. *Well, the chair still works.* “Anything? Anybody?”

Silence—and the remote grinding of metal.

“Just give me something to shoot at.” It was Gloyd, Korsin’s gunnery officer, teeth shining in the shadows. The half smirk was a memento from a Jedi lightsaber swipe years earlier that just missed taking the Houk’s head off. In response, Gloyd had cultivated the only wit aboard as acidic as the commander’s own—but the gunner wasn’t finding much funny today. Korsin read it in the brute’s tiny eyes: *Death in combat’s one thing. But this is no way to go.*

Korsin didn’t bother to look at the *other* side of the bridge. Icy glares there could be taken as a given. Even now, when *Omen* was crippled and out of control.

“Anybody?”

Even now. Korsin’s bushy eyebrows flared into a black V. What was *wrong* with them? The adage was right. A ship needed a crew united in purpose—only the purpose of being Sith was the exaltation of self. Every ensign an emperor. Every rival’s misstep, an opportunity. *Well, here’s an opportunity,* he thought. *Solve this, someone, and you can flat-out have the blasted comfy chair.*

Sith power games. They didn’t mean much now—not against the insistent gravity below. Korsin looked up again at the forward viewport. The vast azure orb visible earlier was gone, replaced by light, gas, and grit raining upward. The latter two, he knew, came from the guts of his own ship, losing the fight against the alien atmosphere. Whatever it was, the planet had *Omen* now. An uncontrolled descent from orbit took a long time, surprisingly long. More time to contemplate your destruction, his father had always said. But the way the ship was shaking, Korsin and his crew might be robbed even of *that* dubious privilege.

“Remember,” he yelled, looking at his entire bridge crew for the first time since it had started. “You *wanted* to be here!”

And they *had* wanted to be there—most of them, anyway. *Omen* had been the ship to get when the Sith mining flotilla gathered at Primus Goluud. The Massassi shock troops in the hold didn’t care where they went—who knew

what the Massassi even *thought* half the time, presuming they did at all. But many sentients who had a choice in the matter picked *Omen*.

Saes, captain of the *Harbinger*, was a fallen Jedi: an unknown quantity. You couldn't trust someone the Jedi couldn't trust, and they would trust just about anyone. Yaru Korsin, the crew members knew. A Sith captain owning a smile was rare enough, and always suspect. But Korsin had been at it for twenty standard years, long enough for those who'd served under him to spread the word. A Korsin ship was an easy ride.

Just not today. Fully loaded with Lignan crystals, *Harbinger* and *Omen* had readied to leave Phaegon III for the front when a Jedi starfighter tested the mining fleet's defenses. While his crescent-shaped Blade fighters tangled with the intruder, Korsin's crew made preparations to jump to hyperspace. Protecting the cargo was paramount—and if they managed to make their delivery before the Jedi turncoat made *his*, well, that was just a bonus. The Blade pilots could hitch back on *Harbinger*.

Only something had gone wrong. A shock to the *Harbinger*, and then another. Sensor readings of the sister ship went nonsensical—and *Harbinger* yawed dangerously toward *Omen*. Before the collision warning could sound, Korsin's navigator reflexively engaged the hyperdrive. It had been in the nick of time ...

... or maybe not. Not the way *Omen* was giving up its vitals now. *They did hit us*, Korsin knew. The telemetry might have told them, had they had any. The ship had been knocked off-course by an astronomical hair—but it was enough.

Captain Korsin had never experienced an encounter with a gravity well in hyperspace, and neither had any of his crew. Stories required survivors. But it felt as though space itself had yawned open near the passing *Omen*, kneading at the ship's alloyed superstructure like putty. It had lasted but a fraction of a second, if time even existed there. The escape was worse than the contact. A sickly snap, and shielding failed. Bulkheads gave. And then, the armory.

The armory had exploded. That was easy enough to know from the gaping hole in the underside of the ship. That it had exploded in hyperspace was a matter of inference: they were still alive. In normal space, all the grenades, bombs, and other pleasantries, the Massassi, were taking to Kirrek would have gone up in a flourish, taking the ship with it. But instead the

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armory had simply vanished—along with an impressive chunk of *Omen's* quarterdeck. The physics in hyperspace were unpredictable by definition; instead of exploding outward, the breached deck simply left the ship in a seismic tug. Korsin could imagine the erupting munitions dropping out of hyperspace light-years behind the *Omen*, wherever it was. That would mean a bad day for someone!

Might as well share the pain.

Omen had shuddered into realspace, decelerating madly—and taking dead aim at a blister of blue hanging before a vibrant star. Was that the source of the mass shadow that had interrupted their trip? Who cared? It was about to end it. Captured, *Omen* had skipped and bounced across the crystal ocean of air until the descent began in earnest. It had claimed his engineer—probably all his engineers—but the command deck still held. Tapani craftsmanship, Korsin marveled. They were falling, but for the moment they were still alive.

“Why isn’t he dead?”

Half mesmerized by the streamers of fire erupting outside—at least the *Omen* was belly-down for this bounce—Korsin only vaguely grew aware of harsh words to his left. “You shouldn’t have made the jump!” stabbed the young voice. “Why isn’t he *dead*?”

Captain Korsin straightened and gave his half brother an incredulous stare. “I *know* you’re not talking to me.”

Devore Korsin jabbed a gloved finger past the commander to a frail man, still jabbing futilely at his control panel and looking very alone. “That navigator of yours! Why isn’t he *dead*?”

“Maybe he’s on the wrong deck?”

“*Yaru!*”

Jokes weren’t going to save Boyle Marcom today, the captain knew. Marcom had been guiding ships through the weirdness of hyperspace since the middle of Marka Ragnos’s rule. Boyle hadn’t been at his best in years, but Yaru Korsin knew a former helmsman of his father’s was always worth having. Not today, though. Whatever had happened back there, it would rightfully be laid at the navigator’s feet.

But assigning blame in the middle of a firestorm? That was Devore all over.

“We’ll do this later,” the elder Korsin said from the command chair. “If there is a later.” Anger flashed in Devore’s eyes. Yaru couldn’t remember

ever seeing anything else there. The pale and lanky Devore little resembled his own ruddy, squat frame—also the shape of their father. But those eyes, and that look? Those could have been a direct transplant.

Their father. He'd never had a day like this. The old spacer had never lost a ship for the Sith Lords. Learning at his side, the teenage Yaru had staked out his own future—until the day he became less enamored of his father's footsteps. The day when Devore arrived. Half Yaru's age, son to a mother from a port on another planet—and embraced by the old veteran without a second thought. Rather than find out how many more children his father had out there to vie for stations on the bridge, Cadet Korsin appealed to the Sith Lords for another assignment. That had not been a mistake. In five years, he made captain. In ten, he won command of the newly christened *Omen* over an accomplished rival many years his senior.

His father hadn't liked that. He'd never lost a ship for the Sith Lords. But he'd lost one to his son.

But now losing the *Omen* was looking like a family tradition. The whole bridge crew—even the outsider Devore—exhaled audibly when rivulets of moisture replaced the flames outside the viewport. *Omen* had found the stratosphere without incinerating, and now the ship was in a lazy saucer spin through clouds heavy with rain. Korsin's eyes narrowed. Water?

Is there even a ground?

The terrifying thought rippled through the minds of the seven on the bridge at once, as they watched the transparisteel viewport bulge and warp: *Gas giant!*

Yes, it took a long time to crash from orbit, presuming you survived reentry. How much longer, if there was no surface? Korsin fumbled aimlessly for the controls set in his armrest. *Omen* would crack and rupture, smothered under a mountain of vapors. They shared the thought—and almost in response, the straining portal darkened. "All of you," he said, "heads down! And grab something ... *now!*"

This time, they did as told. He knew: Tie it to self-preservation, and a Sith would do anything. Even this bunch. Korsin clawed at the chair, his eyes fixed on the forward viewport and the shadow swiftly falling across it.

A wet mass slapped against the hull. Its sprawling form tumbled across the transparisteel, lingering an instant before disappearing. The captain blinked twice. It was there and gone, but it wasn't part of his ship.

It had wings.

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Startled, Korsin sprang from his seat and lurched toward the viewport. This time, the mistake was certifiably his. Already stressed before the midair collision, the transparisteel gave way, shards weeping from the ship like shining tears. A hush of departing air slammed Korsin to the deck plating. Old Marcom tumbled to one side, having lost hold of his station. Sirens sounded—how were they still working?—but the tumult soon subsided. Without thinking, Korsin breathed.

“Air! It’s air!”

Devore regained his footing first, bracing against the wind. Their first luck. The viewport had mostly blown out, not in—and while the cabin had lost pressure, a drippy, salty wind was making its way in. Unaided, Captain Korsin fought his way back to his station. *Thanks for the hand, brother.*

“Just a reprieve,” Gloyd said. They still couldn’t see what was below. Korsin had done a suicide plunge before, but that had been in a bomber—when he’d known where the ground was. That there *was* a ground.

Once-restrained doubts flooded Korsin’s mind—and Devore responded. “Enough,” the crystal hunter barked, struggling against the swaying deck to reach his sibling’s command chair. “Let me at those controls!”

“They’re as dead for you as they are for me!”

“We’ll see about that!” Devore reached for the armrest, only to be blocked by Korsin’s beefy wrist. The commander’s teeth clenched. *Don’t do this. Not now.*

A baby screamed. Korsin looked quizzically at Devore for a moment before turning to see Seelah in the doorway, clutching a small crimson-wrapped bundle. The child wailed.

Darker-skinned than either of them, Seelah was an operative on Devore’s mining team. Korsin knew her simply as Devore’s female—that was the nicest way to put it. He didn’t know which role came first. Now the slender figure looked haggard as she slumped against the doorway. Her child, bound tightly in the manner of their people, had worked a tiny arm free and was clawing at her scattered auburn hair. She seemed not to notice.

Surprise—was it annoyance?—crossed Devore’s face. “I sent you to the lifepods!”

Korsin flinched. The lifepods were a nonstarter—literally. They’d known that back in space when the first one snagged on its stubborn docking claw and exploded right in the ship’s hull. He didn’t know what had happened to

the rest, but the ship had taken such damage to its spine that he figured the whole array was a probable loss.

"We were ... in the cargo hold," she said, gasping as Devore reached her and grasped her arms. "Near our quarters." Devore's eyes darted past her, down the hallway.

"Devore, you can't *go* to the lifepods—"

"Shut up, Yaru!"

"Stop it," she said. "There's land." When Devore stared at her blankly, she exhaled and looked urgently toward the captain. "*Land!*"

Korsin made the connection. "The cargo hold!" The crystals were in a hold safely forward from the damage—in a place with viewports angled to see below. There was something under all that blue, after all. Something that gave them a chance.

"The port thruster will light," she implored.

"No, it won't," Korsin said. Not from any command on the bridge, anyway. "We're going to have to do this by hand—so to speak." He stepped past the ailing Marcom to the starboard viewport, which looked back upon the main bulge of the ship trailing aft. There were four large torpedo tube covers on either side of the ship, spherical lids that swiveled above or below the horizontal plane depending on where they were situated. They never opened those covers in atmospheres, for fear of the drag they would cause. That design flaw might save them. "Gloyd, will they work?"

"They'll cycle—once. But without power, we're gonna have to set off the firing pins to open them."

Devore gawked. "We're not going out there!" They were still at terminal velocity. But Korsin was moving, too, bustling past his brother to the port viewport. "Everyone, to either side!"

Seelah and another crewman stepped to the right pane. Devore, glaring, reluctantly joined her. Alone on the left, Yaru Korsin placed his hand on the coldly sweating portal. Outside, meters away, he found one of the massive circular covers—and the small box mounted to its side, no larger than a comlink. It was smaller than he remembered from inspection. *Where's the mechanism? There.* He reached out through the Force. *Careful ...*

"Top torpedo door, both sides. *Now!*"

With a determined mental act, Korsin triggered the firing pin. A large bolt released explosively, shooting ahead—and the mammoth tube cover moved in response, rotating on its single hinge. The ship, already quaking, groaned

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loudly as the door reached its final position, perched atop the plane of the *Omen* like a makeshift aileron. Korsin looked expectantly behind him, where Seelah's expression assured him of a similar success on her side. Like many of the Sith believers aboard, she had been trained in the use of the Force—but Korsin had never considered using it to make in-flight corrections before. For a moment, he wondered if it had worked ...

Thoom! With a wrenching jolt that leveled the bridge crew, *Omen* tipped downward. It didn't slow the ship as much as Korsin had expected, but that wasn't the point. At least they could see where they were going now, what was below. *If these blasted clouds would clear ...*

At once, he saw it. Land, indeed—but more water. Much more. Jagged, rugged peaks rose from a greenish surf, almost a skeleton of rock lit by the alien planet's setting sun, barely visible on the horizon. They were rocketing quickly into night. There wouldn't be much time to make a decision ...

... but Korsin already knew there was no choice to be made. While more of the crew might survive a water landing, they wouldn't last long when their superiors learned their precious cargo was at the bottom of an alien ocean. *Better they pick the crystals out from among our burned corpses.* Frowning, he ordered the Force-users on the starboard side to activate their lower torpedo doors.

Again, a violent lurch, and *Omen* banked left, angling toward an angry line of mountains. Rearward, a lifepod shot away from the ship—and slammed straight into the ridge. The searing plume was gone from the bridge's field of view in less than a second. Gloyd's torpedo crew would be envious, Korsin thought, shaking his head and blowing out a big breath. Still people alive back there. *They're still trying.*

Omen cleared a snow-covered peak by less than a hundred meters. Dark water opened up below. Another course correction—and *Omen* was quickly running out of torpedo tubes. Another lifepod launched, arcing down and away. Only when the small craft neared the surf did its pilot—if it had one—get the engine going. The rockets shot the pod straight down into the ocean at full speed.

Squinting through sweat, Korsin looked back at his crew. "Depth charge! Fine time for a mixed warfare drill!" Even Gloyd didn't laugh at that one. But it wasn't propriety, the captain saw as he turned. It was what was ahead. More sharp mountains rising from the waters—including a mountain meant for them. Korsin reeled back to his chair. "Stations!"

Seelah wandered in a panic, nearly losing the wailing Jariad as she staggered. She had no station, no defensive position. She began to cross to Devore, frozen at his terminal. There was no time. A hand reached for her. Yaru yanked her close, pushing her down behind the command chair into a protective crouch.

The act cost him.

Omen slammed into a granite ridge at an angle, losing the fight—and still more of itself. The impact threw Captain Korsin forward against the bulkhead, nearly impaling him on the remaining shards of the smashed viewport. Gloyd and Marcom strained to move toward him, but *Omen* was still on the move, clipping another rocky rise and spiraling downward. Something exploded, strewing flaming wreckage in the ship's grinding wake.

Agonizingly, *Omen* spun forward again, the torpedo doors that had been their makeshift airbrakes snapping like driftwood as it slid. Down a gravelly incline it skidded, showering stones in all directions. Korsin, his forehead bleeding, looked up and out to see—

—nothing. *Omen* continued to slide toward an abyss. It had run out of mountain.

Stop. *Stop!*

"Stop!"

Silence. Korsin coughed and opened his eyes.

They were still alive.

"No," Seelah said, kneeling and clinging to Jariad. "We're already dead."

Thanks to you, she did not say—but Korsin felt the words streaming at him through the Force. He didn't need the help. Her eyes said plenty.

Chapter Two

Omen's permanent crew came from the same human stock as Korsin: the debris of a noble house, launched skyward centuries before in the whirlwind that formed the Tapani Empire. The Sith had found them, and found them useful. They were skilled in commerce and industry, all the things the Sith Lords needed most but never had time for with their world-building and world-destroying. His ancestors ran ships and factories, and ran them well. And before long, mingling their blood with that of the Dark Jedi, the Force was in his people, too.

They were the future. They couldn't acknowledge it, but it was obvious. Many of the Sith Lords were still of the crimson-hued species that had long formed the nucleus of their following. But the numbers were turning—and if Naga Sadow wanted to rule the galaxy, they had to.

Naga Sadow. Tentacle-faced, Dark Lord and heir to ancient powers. It was Naga Sadow who had dispatched *Omen* and *Harbinger* in search of Lignan crystals; Naga Sadow who needed the crystals on Kirrek, to defeat the Republic and its Jedi.

Or was it the Jedi and their Republic? It didn't matter. Naga Sadow would kill Captain Korsin and his crew for losing their ship. Seelah was right about that much.

Yet Sadow need not lose the war, depending on what Korsin did now. He still had something. The crystals.

But the crystals were high above at the moment.

It had been a night of horrors, getting 355 people down from the lofty plateau. Sixteen injured had died along the way, and another five had tumbled into the darkness from the narrow ledge that formed the only apparent way up or down. No one doubted that evacuation had been the right call, though. They couldn't stay up there, not with the fires still burning and *Omen* precariously perched. The last to leave the ship, Korsin had nearly soiled himself when one of the proton torpedoes had disengaged from the naked tube, tumbling over the precipice and into oblivion.

By sunrise, they'd found a clearing, halfway down the mountain, dotted with wild grasses. Life was everywhere in the galaxy, even here. It was the first good sign. Above, *Omen* continued to burn. No need to wonder where above them the ship was, Korsin thought. Not while they could follow the smoke.

Now, walking back into the afternoon crowd—less an encampment than a gathering—Korsin knew he never need wonder where his people were, either. Not while his nose worked. “Now I know why we kept the Massassi on their own level,” he said to no one.

“Charming,” came a response from over his shoulder. “I should say they are not very happy with *you*, either.” Ravilan was a Red Sith, pure-blooded as they came. He was quartermaster and keeper of the Massassi, the nasty lumbering bipeds that the Sith prized as instruments of terror on the battlefield. At the moment the Massassi didn't seem so formidable. Korsin followed Ravilan into the fiendish circle, made even less pleasant by the stench of vomit. Florid monsters two and three meters tall sprawled on the ground, heaving and coughing.

“Maybe some kind of pulmonary edema,” Seelah said, passing around purified-air canisters salvaged from an emergency pack. Before connecting with Devore and securing a place on his team, she'd been a battlefield medic—though Korsin couldn't tell from her bedside manner, at least with Massassi. She barely touched the wheezing giants. “We're no longer at elevation, so this should subside. Probably normal.”

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To her left, another Massassi hacked mightily—and mutely regarded the result: a handful of dripping scar tissue. Korsin looked at the quartermaster and asked drily, “Is that normal?”

“You know it’s not,” Ravilan snarled.

From across the clearing, Devore Korsin charged in, shoving his son into Seelah’s hands before she was done wiping them. He seized the brute’s massive wrist, looking for himself. His eyes flared at his brother. “But Massassi are tougher than anything!”

“Anything they can punch, kick, or strangle,” the captain said. An alien planet, however, was an alien planet. They hadn’t had time to do a bioscan. And all the equipment was high above. Devore followed Seelah, backing away from the sickly Massassi.

Eighty of the creatures had survived the crash. The captain learned that Ravilan’s assistants were burning a third of those survivors, even then, over the hillside. Whatever unseen thing it was on this planet that was killing the Massassi, it was doing it quickly. Ravilan showed him the stinking pyre.

“They’re not far enough away,” Korsin said.

“From whom?” Ravilan responded. “Is that depression a permanent camp? Should we remove to a different mountain?”

“Enough, Rav.”

“No witty comeback? I’m surprised. You at least plan *that* far ahead.”

Korsin had fenced with Ravilan on earlier missions, but now wasn’t the time. “I said, *enough*. We’ve surveyed below. You saw it. There’s nowhere to go.” There were beaches at the bottom of the bluff, but they terminated against the oily cliffs that began the next mountain in the chain. And going farther along the chain meant trips through tangles of razor-sharp brambles. “We don’t need an expedition. We’re not staying.”

“I should hope not,” Ravilan said, his own nose turned by the smell of the fires. “Your brother—I mean, Eldrak Korsin’s other son—wants to return to the ship right away. I agree. We must report to Lord Sadow.”

Yaru Korsin stopped. “I have the transmitter codes. It’s my call to make.” He looked up at the second, more distant smoky plume far above. “When it’s safe.”

“Yes, by all means. When it’s safe.”

The captain hadn’t wanted Devore on the mission. Years earlier, he had been relieved when his half brother had abandoned a naval career, drifting into the Sith’s mineralogical service. Power and riches were more easily had

there, searching for gems and Force-imbued crystals. With their father's sponsorship, Devore had become a specialist in using plasma weapons and scanning equipment. The recent conflict with the Jedi found him in high demand—and assigned, with his team, to *Omen*. Korsin wondered whom he'd played a joke on to deserve that. He'd been told Devore officially answered to him, but that would have been a first. Not even Sith Lords were that powerful.

"You should have kept us in orbit!"

"We were never *in* orbit!"

Korsin recognized the voice of the navigator, Marcom, coming from over the dusty rise. He already knew the other one.

Old Marcom was trying to push his way out of the crowd when Captain Korsin topped the hill at a full run. Devore's miners weren't letting their victim go. "You don't know my job!" Marcom yelled. "I did all that I could! Oh, what's the use talking to ..."

Just as Korsin reached the clearing, the crowd surged forward, as if pulled down a drain. One sickeningly familiar crackle followed another.

"No!"

Korsin saw the lightsaber first, rolling toward his feet when he breached the crowd. His father's old helmsman lay ahead, gutted. Next to Seelah and Jariad stood Devore, his lightsaber glowing crimson in the lengthening shadows.

"The navigator attacked first," Seelah said.

The captain gawked.

"What *difference* does it make?" Korsin charged into the center, lifting the loose lightsaber into his hand with the Force. Devore stood his ground, smiling gently and keeping his lightsaber burning. His dark eyes had a wild look, a familiar one. He was shaking a little, but not from fear—not fear Yaru Korsin could feel. The captain knew it was something else, something more dangerous. He turned Marcom's unlit weapon tip-down and shook it. "That was our navigator, Devore! What if the star charts don't work?"

"I can find our way back," Devore said smartly.

"You'll have to!" Korsin grew conscious of the mix around him. Gold-uniformed miners in the circle, yes, but bridge crew, too. A red-faced Sith—not Ravilan, but one of his cronies. He was undeterred. "This is not going to do any good, any of you. We wait here until it's safe to return to the ship. That's all."

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Seelah straightened, emboldened by the supporters around. “When will it be safe? In days? Weeks?” Her child wailed. “How long must we last—until it’s safe enough for *you*?”

Korsin stared at her and breathed deeply. He threw Marcom’s lightsaber to the ground. “Tell Ravilan there’s one more for the pyre.” As a begrudging crowd gave him room to exit, he said, “We go when I say. That ship blows up, or tips into the ocean, and we really will have problems. *We go when I say.*”

The world spun. As Korsin stepped backward, Gloyd stepped forward, keeping a wary yellow eye on the grumbling masses. He’d missed the fun.

“Captain.”

They looked past each other, watching Sith in all directions. “Not really happy here, Gloyd.”

“Then you’ll want to hear this,” the hulking Houk rasped. “As I see it, we’ve got three choices. We get these people off this rock in whatever will fly. Or we look for cover and hide until they all kill one another.”

“What’s the third choice?”

Gloyd’s painted face crinkled. “There isn’t one. But I figured it’d cheer you up if you thought there was.”

“I hate you.”

“Hate’s good. Maybe you can be Dark Lord of the Sith someday.” Korsin had known Gloyd since his first command. The Houk was the kind of bridge officer every Sith captain wanted: more interested in his own job than in taking someone else’s. Gloyd was smart to spare himself the trouble. Or maybe he just loved blowing things up too much to want to leave the tactical station.

Of course, with that station left roughly a kilometer up the mountain, Korsin had no idea how useful his old ally would be. But Gloyd still had fifty kilos on most of the crew. No one would move against them while they stood together.

No one would move alone, anyway.

Korsin looked back across the clearing at the mob. Ravilan was there now, huddled with Devore and Seelah and a couple of junior officers. Devore spotted his brother watching and averted his gaze; Seelah simply stared back at the commander, unabashed. Korsin spat an epithet. “Gloyd, we’re *dying* here. I don’t understand them!”

“Yeah, you do,” Gloyd said. “You know what we say: You and me, we’re about the job. Other Sith are about what’s *next*.” The Houk plucked a scaly root from the ground and sniffed it. “Trouble is, this whole *place* is about what’s next. You’re trying to keep ’em together—when you’ve really got to show ’em there’s something after this rock. There’s no time to win people over. You pick a path. Anybody won’t walk it ...”

“Push ’em off?” Korsin grinned. It really wasn’t his style. Gloyd returned the smile and sank his teeth into the root. Wincing comically, the gunnery chief excused himself. They wouldn’t be living off the land—not *this* land, anyway.

Looking past the crowd, Korsin found his eyes drifting up toward the shrinking tendril of smoke drifting from the heights above.

Above. Gloyd was right. It was the only way.

Chapter Three

The Massassi had died on the mountain. Korsin had left at dawn with three bearers: the healthiest of the Massassi, each passing around the remaining air canister. It hadn't lasted, and neither had they. Whatever it was on this planet that didn't like Massassi existed up above as well as below.

It was just as well, Korsin thought, leaving the blood-colored corpses where they fell. He couldn't run Massassi. They were pliant and obedient warriors, but they answered to force, not words. A good Sith captain needed to use both, but Korsin leaned more on the latter. It had made for a good career.

Not down the mountain, though. Things were going to get worse. They already had. It had been cold in the night—chillier than he had expected from what seemed like an oceanic climate. Some of the heavily injured had failed from exposure or from lack of medical care.

Later, some kind of animal—Gloyd described it to him as a six-legged mammal, half mouth—vaulted from a burrow and tore into one of the injured. It took five exhausted sentries to slay the beast. One of Devore's mining specialists cast a chunk of the creature's body into the campfire and

sampled a piece. She vomited blood and died within heartbeats. The captain was glad he hadn't been awake to see that.

Whatever relief there was in knowing there was life on the planet ended right there. *Omen's* crew didn't number enough to sort out what was safe and what wasn't. They had to go home, regardless of the state of things with the ship.

Korsin looked up into the morning sky, now streaked more by cirrus clouds than smoke. He hadn't told the others about the thing that had struck the viewport during the descent. What had he seen? Another predator, probably. There was no point in bringing it up. Everyone was scared enough, and fear led to anger. The Sith understood this—they made use of it—but uncontrolled, it wasn't doing them any good. The sun hadn't even set before lightsabers came out again in a dispute over a foodpak. One less Red Sith. Not twenty standard hours since the crash and things were starting to get basic. Tribal.

Time *had* run out.

Omen had come to rest in a small indentation down a short ways on the other side of a crest. Sky and ocean spread out ahead. The ship had stopped on the incline just in time, and there wasn't a flat plane left on the vehicle. The sight of his ship, shattered on the alien rocks, moved Korsin only a little. He had known opponents—mainly captains in the Republic—who were sentimental about their commands. It wasn't the Sith way. *Omen* was a tool like any other, a blaster or lightsaber, to be used and discarded. And while the ship's resilience had saved his life, it had betrayed him first. Not a thing to be forgiven.

Still, it had a purpose. Flying again was out of the question, but the sight of the metal tower just above the bridge gave him hope. The receiver would find the Republic's hyperspace beacons in an instant, telling Korsin his location. And the ship's transmitter would tell the Sith where to find *Omen*—and, more important, the Lignan. Maybe not in time for the engagement at Kirrek, but Sadow would want it nonetheless. Walking carefully over loose stones to the airlock, Korsin tried not to think of the other possibility. If the Battle of Kirrek was lost because *Omen* was lost, he would die.

But he would die having completed his mission.

A vial lay empty in Devore's open, quaking palm.

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Devore had somehow gotten to *Omen* first—and was sitting in the commander chair. Collapsed in the chair was the more accurate description, the captain saw. “I see your cabin’s intact,” Korsin said. He remembered Seelah returning to the living quarters for little Jariad. In a fire, you go for the thing you love.

“I didn’t go there first,” Devore said, limply letting the vial drop to the deck beside the command chair. There was another container there, particles of glistening spice still beside it. *He’s been here awhile*, Korsin guessed. He suspected spice was why Devore had gone into mining in the first place; his brother’s love of the narcotic had certainly shortened his naval career.

“I didn’t go to my cabin—I mean, it wasn’t *first*,” Devore said, pointing vaguely to the ceiling. “I went to look at the transmitter array.”

“Structure looked sound.”

“From outside, maybe.” Slouched in the command chair, Devore watched blankly as his brother clambered over fallen beams to reach the ladder. Above the ceiling panels, Korsin saw what Devore must have seen: a melted mass of electronics, fried when a seam opened in the hull during the descent. The external transmitter stood, all right—but as a monument to its former purpose, nothing more.

Climbing down, Korsin made his way to the comm control panel and pressed the button several times. Nothing. He sighed. The story was the same everywhere on the bridge. He switched the transmitter on one last time and stepped back over the debris. *Omen* was dead. But Sith had survived death before, and the guts of *Omen* still held enough spare parts to allow a transplant. His eyes darted to the hallway. Surely, in the workshop—

“Gone, with the armory!” The explosion had vented most of the stores into space. Devore buried his face in his hands, finished.

Korsin wasn’t. “The landing bay. The Blades.” The fighters had been in flight when *Omen* made its sudden departure, but something in the landing bay might be serviceable.

“Forget it, Yaru. The deck was crushed when we hit. I couldn’t even get in there.”

“Then we will cut the ship down deck by deck and fabricate the parts we need!”

“With what? Our lightsabers?” Devore rose, steadying himself against the armrest. “We’re done!” His cough became a laugh. The Lignan crystals offered the Sith power—just not the kind to operate a distress beacon, a

receiver, or even the celestial atlas. “We are *here*, Yaru. We are here and we are out of action. Out of the war. Out of everything. We are out of it!”

“*You’re* out of it.”

Korsin climbed into a hallway and began rummaging through cabinets, looking for something that would help those below. Unfortunately, *Omen* had been outfitted for a deep-space mission. Sith provisioners were sparing. No portable generators at all. Another compartment held clothes. That would help tonight, but they wouldn’t be staying.

“We have to stay,” Devore said, as if he had read Korsin’s thought.

“What?”

“We have to stay,” Devore repeated. Standing alone, a tombstone in the shadows of the hallway, he spoke with a voice that quaked. “It’s been two days. You don’t understand. It’s been two days.”

Korsin didn’t stop his search, passing in front of his brother to another door, jammed by the damage.

“It’s been two days, Yaru. Naga Sadow will think we ran away. To take the Lignan crystals for *ourselves*!”

“He’ll blame *Saes*,” Korsin said, remembering. Naga Sadow hadn’t fully trusted the fallen Jedi who captained the *Harbinger*. He’d asked Korsin to keep an eye on Saes, to report back. When he did—if he did—Korsin fully intended to explain how the *Harbinger* had lost control, how the *Harbinger* had struck the *Omen*. With any luck, Sadow had *Harbinger* already—

Korsin released the door handle. He hadn’t seen what happened to *Harbinger* after the collision, but it was a safe bet that Sadow would have the crippled *Harbinger* already. And Saes, sitting there with only half the shipment of Lignan crystals and unable to deliver, would be bargaining for his life, saying anything about the *Omen*. He would sing harmonies the Khil would be proud of.

Korsin looked down the hallway. “Back at Primus Goluud. On the station. You met with Sadow, didn’t you?”

Devore shuffled. “To discuss the Lignan operation.”

“You weren’t discussing something else? Like who should command this mission?”

Devore glared at him with bloodshot eyes. That look again.

“You were discussing who should command this mission,” Korsin pressed, surprised at his own calm. “What did you say when Sadow refused to put you in charge?”

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The captain's blood froze. He knew how things always went with Devore—how things must have gone. Sadow had rejected his half brother, and Devore had said something. What? Not enough to offend Sadow—no, Devore was still here in the wreck, drawing labored breaths. But Sadow would have reason to suspect Devore's loyalty, would have cause to wonder whether his crystals were safe. The one thing Yaru Korsin had was his reputation for playing it straight—but now at a minimum, Sadow would know that Korsin was not the absolute master of his own vessel. And if he wasn't ...

Devore's hand shook—and his lightsaber flew into it. The weapon that had killed Boyle Marcom ignited in his hand.

"What did I tell you?" Korsin yelled, approaching him anyway. "No games on my ship!"

Shaken, Devore darted back toward the bridge. Korsin followed. "The only way we come out of this is if we're completely clean, Devore! Sadow can't think we did this on purpose!" He reached the doorway. "*No games on my ship!*"

Korsin walked into a hurricane. Devore stood atop the command chair, calling forth all the debris of the bridge like a deity on a mountaintop. Korsin rolled, fragments of transparisteel raking his face and ripping into his uniform. Reaching Gloyd's station, he mounted his own defense, cocooning himself in the Force against the onslaught. Devore was as strong as any in his family—and now he was riding chemicals Korsin didn't understand.

A beam slammed against the bulkhead—and *Omen* shivered. A second strike, and the bridge tipped forward, knocking Devore off his perch. Korsin didn't let him get up again. The moment Devore's head appeared behind the chair, Korsin Force-flung him out through the ruined viewport. He had to get this outside, before everything was lost.

Korsin bolted uphill through the hallway to the airlock, huffing as he did. *Fighting a spice-crazed assailant on a teetering deathtrap? I must be the crazy one!* The step down from the portal was now a leap. His boot sank into a soft patch as he hit, wrenching his ankle and sending him tumbling down the scree-covered slope. Biting his lip, he tried to clamber back from the brink toward *Omen's* crushed nose. A shadow was falling on him. He lit his lightsaber—

Suddenly he saw it—or it saw him. Another winged creature, high over the near ridge, circling and watching. Watching *him*. Korsin blinked sand

from his eyes as the creature soared away. It was the same as the one from the descent—almost. The difference was ...

Thoom! Korsin felt himself lifted into the air and before he could register what was happening, he slammed into the wreck of *Omen*. Devore marched into view, pebbles rolling before him as if propelled by a magnet. Trapped against the crumpled frame, Korsin struggled to stand. His father's familiar look was gone from Devore's face, replaced by a bleak nothingness.

"It's over, Yaru," Devore said, raising his lightsaber high. "We should have done this before. It's been decided. *I'm* the Korsin that should be in command."

It's been decided? The thought flashed through Yaru Korsin's mind even as the lightsaber flashed past his ear. It sparked against the *Omen's* battered armor. The commander raised his weapon to parry the next stroke—and the next, and the next. Devore hammered away. No style, just fury. Korsin found nowhere to go, except along the side of the ship, sliding backward toward the port-side torpedo tubes. Three of the doors had been opened in the descent. The fourth—

Korsin spotted the control box, just like the one he'd remotely manipulated in the descent. He flexed toward it through the Force, and ducked. The firing pin activated, bulleting forward and catching Devore in the shoulder of his lightsaber arm. The torpedo door tried to cycle open, but pinned against the ground it only dug into the strata, sending a stream of rocks flooding beneath the ship. *Omen* lurched forward again, with Devore sliding in front of it toward the edge and the ocean below.

It took a minute for Korsin to get loose from the handhold he'd found on the ship, and another for the dust to clear. Finding *Omen* surprisingly still, he gingerly stepped away on the crushed slate. *Omen's* bow had impaled itself on a razor rise on the promontory, just meters from the edge.

Ahead of it, partially buried in rubble, lay his brother. His golden uniform shredded, his shoulder bloodied, Devore writhed on the precipice. He tried to kneel, shrugging off the surrounding rocks, only to collapse again.

Devore still gripped his lightsaber. How he could still be holding on to it with the whole world falling down, Korsin didn't know. The captain fastened his own lightsaber to his belt.

"Yaru?" Devore said. It was a whimper now. "Yaru—I *can't see*." His face was tearstained, but intact. Then his lightsaber rolled free, plummeting out of sight over the cliff's edge and revealing the oily pink stain on his hand.

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Red Rage. That was what had been in the vials, Korsin thought. That was what had given Devore his manic power, and that was what was stealing from him now.

The shoulder wound wasn't bad, Korsin saw, lifting his brother to his feet. Devore was young; with Seelah tending to him, he might even survive out here, presuming he could live without the spice. But ... what then? What could be said that wasn't already said?

It's been decided.

A helpful hold became a tighter grip—and Yaru Korsin turned his brother to face the setting sun over the ocean. “I *will* complete my mission,” he said, looking over the side to the ocean yawning far below. “And I will protect my crew.”

He let go.

Chapter Four

It was nearly night when Korsin appeared on the twice-trodden trail, pulling a makeshift sledge crafted from a mess table. With thermal blankets and the remaining foodpaks heaped upon it, Korsin had needed the help of the Force a few times to get it down the mountain. Straps from pouches cut into his shoulders and neck, leaving ugly welts. The single campfire had become several. He was glad to see them.

Ravilan appeared glad to see him, too, after an initial surprised reaction. “The beacon! Is it working?”

“I pushed the button myself,” Korsin announced.

“And?”

“And we wait.”

Ravilan’s eyes narrowed in the smoky haze. “You know where we are? You spoke to someone?” Korsin’s attention had already turned to unloading the packs to anxious crewmembers. Ravilan lowered his voice. “Where ... are your Massassi?”

Korsin didn’t look up. “All dead. You don’t think I wanted to do this myself, do you?”

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The quartermaster's crimson face paled a little. "No, of course not—Captain." He looked back at the summit, fading in the surrounding darkness. "Perhaps others of us could have a look at the transmitter. We might—"

"Ravilan, if you want to go back up there, you're welcome to. But I'd bring a team with some heavy equipment, because if we don't get some supports under that ship, the next person who boards could take it on its last flight." Korsin set down the last pack and stretched his neck. "Where are *your* Massassi?"

Ravilan stared. "All dead."

Korsin stepped free, at last, from the cabling he'd used to drag the sledge. The bonfire blazed invitingly. So why was he so cold?

He understood. "Hello, Seelah."

"Where's Devore?"

He looked at her coldly. Seelah stood, her tarnished gold uniform flickering in the firelight. "Where *is* Devore?" he repeated.

"He went up—" She stopped herself. No one was supposed to leave camp. And now, the look in Yaru Korsin's eyes.

She squeezed Jariad, who woke crying.

The pep talk began as many of Korsin's did—with a summation of Things Everyone Already Knows. But this speech was different, because there were so many things nobody knew, himself included. The assurance that Naga Sadow still valued their cargo rang true for all, and while they were clearly a long way from anywhere, few could imagine the Sith Lord's desire exceeding his reach. Even if they were less sanguine about what Sadow felt about *them*, Korsin knew his crew would accept that someone, somewhere, was looking for them.

They just didn't need to know how long that might take. It was too soon for that. Korsin would worry about Sadow later. This place couldn't be about what was next. It had to be about now.

By the speech's end, Korsin found himself growing unusually philosophical: "It was our destiny to land on this rock—and we are bound to our destiny. For a time, it looks like, we're also bound to this rock," he said. "So be it. We're Sith. Let's make it ours."

He looked toward a satellite campfire and spotted Gloyd and the remains of his gunnery crew bristling against the breeze. He waved them to the main

bonfire. It would be another hard night, Korsin knew, and the supplies he'd brought would soon run out.

But he knew something else. Something he'd seen, that no one else had.

The winged beast had carried a rider.

The Force was with them.

Gripping her son, Seelah watched the circle break. Nodding, human Sith set to their tasks, stepping around Ravilan, the master without Massassi. He stood aloof, commiserating with the Red Sith and the few other surviving aliens. Energized and triumphant, Yaru Korsin conferred with Gloyd—keeping his confidences, as he always had, to the huge alien. Too strong to be defeated, too stupid to betray him—and dumb to the Force. The perfect ally.

Turning away from the Houk, Korsin saw Seelah. Another new land to be broken to his will, perhaps? There was no one to stand in his way—not anymore. He smiled at her.

Seelah returned his gaze coldly. Thinking of Devore, thinking of little Jariad, she made a quick decision. Summoning all her anger, all her hatred, all her will ...

... Seelah smiled back.

Devore had underestimated Yaru Korsin. Whatever came, Seelah thought, she would not. She would bide her time.

Time, they had.

Skyborn

Chapter One

5,000 years BBY

“Heretic!”

“Good to see you too, Mother,” Adari said. “Did the children behave?”

The door hadn’t fully closed when the smaller child was in Adari’s arms, shoved there by Eulyn. Adari’s older boy bounded into the room, hobbling her. Under attack from four purple arms, Adari staggered toward the wall, looking for a spot to drop her nonliving cargo. The canvas bag thudded against the stone floor.

“Heretic! That’s what your uncle says they’re calling you,” Eulyn said. “He was here—and neighbor Wertram, the tailor. And his wife, too—she never leaves the hut for anything! *Eight people* have been by today!”

“Well, don’t look outside,” Adari said. “More followed me home.” She shooed the gangly older child away and tried to rescue her silvery hair from her toddler’s mouth. Short hair wasn’t the fashion for Keshiri women, but for Adari, it was self-defense. Where her youngest was concerned, it’d never be short enough. “Is the stew on?”

“Stew?” Eulyn yanked her little grandson back, only to see Adari dart into the kitchen. Flushed with aggravation, Eulyn’s skin took on a violet hue that

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almost matched her daughter's. "You're worried about dinner! You don't have any idea what's been going on around here, do you?"

"It's a dinner break. I was working."

"Working, nothing. I know where you were!"

Adari stared into the clay crock full of boiling meat and vegetables and sighed. Of course her mother knew where she'd been. *Everyone* did. Adari Vaal, collector of rocks and stones; young widow of the valiant uvak-rider on whom so many hopes had rested. Adari Vaal, enemy of right and order; absent mother and misleader of other people's children. Today had been her third day of testimony before the Neshtovar. It had gone as well as the other two.

"What is that *sound*?"

"They're hitting the house with rocks," Adari said, returning with a steaming bowl that she set on the table. Standing back, she swung the front door wide and watched as several gifts from the community bounced over the threshold. She slammed the door quickly. A peppery stone under the empty crèche drew her eye. She reached for it with a sinewy, scratched arm. "That's a nice one," she said, turning over the rock in her hand. "Not from around here." She was apparently drawing people from all over. She'd have to look around, later. Who needed expeditions when you had an angry mob to collect samples?

Adari knelt and put the discovery in her pouch, already overflowing with stones of every shape and color. Above, the clatter grew louder. The younger child wailed. Eulyn's huge dark eyes widened further with horror. "Adari, listen!" she said. "They're hitting the roof now!"

"That's actually thunder."

"It's proof, that's what it is! The Skyborn have forsaken you."

"No, Mother, it's proof that they're *protecting* me," Adari said, eating standing up. "If it rains, the mob can't set our house on fire."

That wasn't likely to happen—the widow of a Neshtovari was a protected person, unlikely to be killed in a riot. However, there was nothing wrong with making her life miserable, and since her sin was against the Neshtovar themselves, no authority would stop them. In fact, little displays like this were good for public order.

Adari poked her head into the backyard. No rocks there. Just the uvak, doing what he had done all year: taking up most of the place and being unfragrant. Emerald reptilian eyes opened long enough to shoot her a bad

look. His leathery wings shifted, raking against the sides of the pen. The beast didn't mind the cooling rain, but the noise from the street had disturbed his royal slumber.

Riderless uvak were all sloth and bad attitude, but Nink hadn't liked his rider when he had one. He was Adari's least favorite thing, but he came with the house. In a sense, the house was his.

In olden times, when a Neshtovari—an uvak-rider—died, the community had slain the deceased's family, as well. That practice had ended, perhaps the only time the Neshtovar had allowed practicality to overrule tradition. Uvak were precious, temperamental, and attached to their riders; stabling them with the dead rider's survivors often kept the beasts sane enough to be useful for the breeding market. Not to mention, Adari mused, what it must have done for *Neshtovar* breeding. The riders hadn't had great social lives when death was in the picture. But since the change, uvak-riders had become highly sought after as mates in Keshiri society.

Adari hadn't sought Zhari Vaal at all. She was interested in rocks; Zhari was their equal for conversational ability. In nine years he had given her two dim-witted children, a description that seemed less harsh to her than maternally charitable. She loved them well enough, but they were showing no signs of being any kinder or brighter than their father had been. Foolishness bred true. She, the fool for not running away; he, well, he was Zhari Vaal. The "valiant young rider of the Neshtovar on whom so many hopes rested"—that was the line from the wake—had mistreated Nink one too many times. One beautiful morning, the beast had flown Zhari far out over the sea and unceremoniously dropped him. Adari was sure she had seen a hint of satisfaction in the creature's bright green eyes when he returned home. She'd never gotten along with Nink before, but at least now she paid him some respect. When it came to Zhari, the uvak had had more sense than she did.

It wasn't all her fault, she knew. The match had resulted from years of lobbying by Eulyn, seeking to lock in her family's future position. Only males became riders, but Keshiri property descended matrilineally; now Adari and her mother had the uvak and the sturdy vosso-bark house, while their neighbors still lived in huts of lashed-together hejarbo shoots. Eulyn was thrilled—and Adari was content to let the children be Eulyn's domain, too. Adari had done her duty; the Keshiri had been advanced by another generation. Now she could concentrate on something important.

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If they'd let her.

"I have to go back," she said, lifting her younger son from his work destroying the dinner table. The afternoon hearing had gone long, and an unprecedented evening session loomed.

"I knew you'd do something like this," Eulya said, her gaze piercing her daughter's back. "I've always said all that digging around in the filth would do you no good. And arguing with the Neshtovar! Why do you always have to be *right*?"

"I don't know, Mother. But it's something I'm going to have to live with," Adari said, handing off the dripping toddler. A smeary imprint remained on her tunic—no time for a change. "Try to get Tona and Finn to actually sleep tonight. I'll be back."

She opened the door carefully to find that the rain had driven off the crowd. Comfort trumped belief on Kesh. But the rocks remained, dozens of ironic little statements scattered all across the stoop. If the hearings lasted any longer, she wouldn't have to do any more field research for the season—everything she needed would be on her doorstep.

Perhaps she should offend the Skyborn every year.

"We were talking about the flamestones," Adari reminded the chief of the Neshtovar.

"You were talking," Izri Dazh said. "I accept no such term." The aged rider and high councilor hobbled around the edge of the Circle Eternal, a plaza where a tall column served as a massive sundial. Adari looked around. Another gorgeous evening, for a place that had no other kind. It was the same every day, inland: a brief, determined afternoon rain followed by a cool breeze that blew straight through the night. But now half the village had forgone real entertainments to watch a bald, bloodless man harangue a young woman. "There *are* no flamestones," he said, gesturing to a pair of crimson rocks on a pedestal beside the central column. "I see here only normal stones of Kesh, as you might find on any hillside."

Adari coughed.

"You have something to say?"

"I'd better not." Adari looked up from her seat in the sandy clearing—and then around at the glaring listeners. What was the point? No one would listen. Why keep making it worse ...

She took another look at Izri. This lavender wraith was the man who had eulogized Zhari. What did he know about anything? What business did the Neshtovar have telling *anyone* what to think, just for convincing a few lazy animals to take them for rides now and again?

Fine, she thought, rising. *These'll be two fewer rocks they can throw.* She took a stone from the pedestal. "I have—the scholars of Kesh have collected stones from every part of this continent. We record what we find. We compare. This rock came from the foot of the Sessal Spire, on the southern coast."

The crowd murmured. Everyone knew the smoking Spire, rumbling and bubbling at the edge of civilization. Someone *must* have been crazy to go out there collecting rocks!

"The Spire created this stone, from the flames it holds inside. And this," Adari said, picking up the other rock, "was found right here outside the village, buried in the riverbed." The stones were identical. "Now, the mountains ringing our plateau aren't smokers—what we call volcanoes—at least, not now. But this rock being here suggests they might once have been. This whole continent, in fact, might have been created by them."

"Heretic!"

"Is my mother here?" Adari craned her neck, scanning the crowd. Someone tittered.

Izri took the stones from her and rustled along the perimeter of the audience. "You say these stones came ... from *below*," he said, the horrible word dripping from his tongue. "And created all that is Kesh."

"Then, and now. The smokers are building more land all the time."

"But you know that all that is Kesh came from the *Skyborn*," Izri said, jabbing his cane in her direction. "Nothing can be born of Kesh anew!"

She knew; every child knew. The Skyborn were the great beings above, the closest thing the Kesh had to deities. Well, there was something closer: The Neshtovar, as the self-proclaimed Sons of the Skyborn, might as well have *been* the Skyborn as far as life on Kesh was concerned. Keshiri faith was vertical; high was mighty. The elevated were venerated. It was Izri's uvak-riding group that, ages before, had brought down from the lofty oceanside peaks the wisdom of the great battle of creation. Riding colossal uvak of crystal, the Skyborn had fought the Otherside in the stars. The battle raged for eons, with the Otherside injuring the Skyborn before being

defeated. Drops of Skyborn blood fell upon the roiling black seas, forming the land that birthed the Keshiri people.

Adari wondered about the biology of a gigantic, sandy-blooded race—but the Neshtovar notion had something going for it: Maps depicting Keshtah, the great continent, all looked as if one of her kids had spilled something on them. Long ridged peninsulas spattered in all directions from a cluster of plateaus, forming enormous, often unwalkable coastlines and fjords enough for the Keshiri to harvest marine life forever. Farther up the many rivers to the plateaus, farmers drew even more from the rich soil. The Keshiri numbers were both vast and well fed.

About the Otherside, Adari found the Neshtovar were incurious to a fault. “That which opposed the Skyborn” meant death, sickness, fire, rebellion—in no particular order—when it wasn’t taking mortal form in accordance with the storyteller’s needs. The Otherside came “from below,” another element in the message of vertical faith. And that was all there was to say. Given the elders’ devotion to the Skyborn, Adari was surprised they hadn’t hammered down who or what the Otherside was. But then, if they had, they’d have come up with a better name.

Which wasn’t stopping Izri from invoking it repeatedly as he railed at her. “Your words glorify the Otherside, Adari Vaal. It’s why you are here. You are here for preaching—”

“Teaching!”

“—telling these *lies* about the Great Battle to your acolytes!”

“Acolytes? They’re *students!*” She searched the crowd for familiar faces. Her students had ducked out the day before when things had gotten rough, but some of their parents were here. “You, Ori Garran! You sent your son to the scholars because he wasn’t any good at the mill. And Wertram, your daughter. Everyone here in Tahv—do you think the village is going to *fall into a hole* because I talked to your children about some *rocks?*”

“*It very well could!*” Izri grabbed his cane from its spot by the pedestal and shook it. “This land was a part of the living Skyborn. Do you think they do not hear you? When the ground quakes, when the smokers burn—it’s their remnant acting in sympathy with their wishes. Their wishes that we honor them, and hate the Otherside!”

This again. “I know that’s what you think,” Adari said, searching for slow, even tones. “I don’t pretend to know what forces work the world—”

“That’s clear!”

“—but if disagreeable words caused the world to shake, Kesh would rock every time husbands and wives quarreled!” She inhaled deeply. “Surely, the Skyborn have more important affairs than to police our own little disagreements. I know they do.”

Silence. Adari looked around. Dark Keshiri eyes, once aimed at her, pointed down and away. She’d won a few, that time. Maybe not enough to let her keep her job, but enough that she could keep collecting—

Krakka-boooooom!

Purple faces turned west, toward the Cetajan Mountains. Jutting out into the ocean known as the Sea of Flames, the western range provided the village of Tahv some of its finest sunsets. But now the flames were coming from the mountain peak itself. A pillar of fiery ash billowed from the summit.

It made no sense. Adari helped Izri to his feet. “That—that’s a granite peak,” she said over the subsiding echo. “It’s not volcanic!”

“It is now!”

Chapter Two

A rock was a simple thing, but as her grandfather had told her, “By simple things, we know the world.” Adari had never felt shame for all those hours she’d spent searching the creek beds, or for finding more of interest in the shards of a shattered stone than in her children’s first words. She was teaching them—but the rock was teaching *her*.

Now, thanks to a simple rock, she was seeing more of the world than ever before—from high above, clinging to the broad back of Nink. It was an unlikely position for either of them, but she’d been in it for most of the night and part of a day. Her first uvak-flight. It wasn’t by choice.

The hours after the explosion on the mountain hadn’t gone that badly, she thought. Audience members at the hearing had fled to their homes. She’d done the same after Dazh and his cohorts left together, quibbling over signs and portents.

By the next morning, however, the mood of the town had changed. The faraway Cetajan peak was still smoking, but it had become clear that it posed no danger to Tahv or the villages farther down the watershed. It was safe for everyone to go outside—out to Adari’s front yard, to express their

feelings about her faithless words and the smoldering addition to the skyline they had caused. The Skyborn *did* listen. What other proof was needed? If the Keshiri couldn't silence Adari Vaal, they'd at least make sure their voices were louder than hers.

They'd been doing a good job of it when Adari sent Eulyn and the kids out to take refuge at her uncle's place. The growing crowd, still pelting the house with rocks, had parted to let the innocents leave. But the mob had stayed straight through the afternoon rain—and by sunset, the Neshtovar themselves were outside, their uvak tethered safely away from the throng. By the time Izri Dazh had hobbled up the steps to pound on her door, Adari had seen the first torches lit outside.

That had been enough for her. The torches could've been for light—but they might have been for something worse. She'd clearly exceeded whatever protection a widow of an uvak-rider was afforded. The Keshiri weren't big on violence, but they didn't have a lot of variety in their social sanctions, either. Judging that it didn't look like a banishing kind of crowd, Adari had turned in desperation to her own backyard, and that least liked portion of her legacy: Nink.

Her departure over the rooftop had surprised the people out front almost as much as the maneuver's success had surprised her. The uvak was most surprised of all. With his owner dead, Nink could have expected never to be ridden again. Uvak took to new riders so seldom that they were promptly put out to stud. Awakening to Adari trying to clamber aboard his fleshy back, Nink could have done anything, gone anywhere.

He went up.

Adari had spent the rest of that night alternately screaming and dodging pursuit by Neshtovar fliers. The latter feat was made easier by Nink's insistence on soaring far out over the ocean. Those had been the worst moments for Adari, who knew the animal's past. But something on the uvak's part, perhaps curiosity, kept him from sending her to Zhari's grave. Just before dawn, Nink had finally found a seaside mountain roost, where Adari immediately collapsed with exhaustion. Amazingly, when she awoke, the uvak was still there, stuffing his beak with what little foliage there was. Home clearly wasn't looking that attractive to Nink anymore, either.

Now, on the second morning since the explosion, Adari saw that her directionless night flight had taken her near the source of anxiety. The Cetajan Range was a chain of craggy goliaths slivered from the mainland—

a prominent part of the horizon when seen from the interior, but as inaccessible as places on the western shoreline got. An expedition of rock hunters had brought back what little Adari knew of the place—and that had required a sympathetic volunteer Neshtovari willing to fly a sample return mission. Seeing the mountain ahead of her, Adari was overtaken by the urge to see the truth up close. If the explosion wasn't volcanic, it could set things right with her and the community. And if the mountain was suddenly volcanic, she was curious about that, too. What was the process involved?

Or were the scholars wrong about the makeup of the range? Had the uvak-rider flubbed the sample?

That was probably it. Adari's anger rose as Nink did, the uvak comfortably clearing the chain in preparation for an oceanside approach. It would be poetic, Adari thought, if the one project the scholars had entrusted to a Neshtovar had resulted in wrong information. *Cetajan Range samples, nothing*, she thought. *The idiot probably brought us rocks from his front path!* She shuddered, and not just from the chilly air. Why should she be made to suffer for their colossal—

Suddenly the source of the smoke column came into view. Adari nearly fell off Nink right then. She'd half expected to see an open caldera, steaming like the smokers—*smoke* really was a misnomer—she'd seen in the south. Instead, a massive shining *shell* sat in an indentation on the seaward side of the mountain. That was the word that entered her mind, even if the scale was completely wrong: its sharp, corrugated ridges resembled the ancient conchs she'd seen returned from the seabed. But this shell was the size of the Circle Eternal!

And this shell had smoke—not steam—billowing from several ruptures. Tremendous grooves gouged behind the body showed it had struck downward at an angle. The fires inside were now nearly spent, but she could tell from the melted mangle that they must have been far larger once. The explosion producing the plume visible from the inland side must have happened right when it landed, she thought.

Landed?

Before Adari could contemplate this, movement caught her eye. One of the apertures in the shell disgorged something, something that struck the gravel below and disappeared in a slide of dust. She nudged the uvak nearer. A flash of crimson light appeared in the small cloud—and at its end ...

... *a man.*

The man looked up at her. He was pale of face, lighter than the sickest Keshiri she had ever seen. And in his left hand was a shaft of brilliant red light the size of Izri's cane.

Was it in his hand—or was it part of his hand? Adari panicked, and Nink agreed, swooping out of the way. A violent but welcome updraft yanked them both back out over the sea.

Adari shook her head violently and closed her eyes as Nink found smoother air. What had she seen? It had the shape of a man, yes. Hair, darker than any Keshiri—but then that red light. *What was that light?* And there was something else moving on the mountain, too, something she'd seen out of the corner of her eye. Was the shell a nest of some kind?

She swallowed hard, her throat raw from the wind and elevation. It was all too macabre. Sample return missions, Neshtovar inquests—none of her past concerns stood for anything against what she'd seen. Opening her eyes, she brought Nink around on a looping approach parallel to the jagged beach. The giant shell perched near the end of a sheer drop-off, far above. She'd approach from below, this time, rising carefully until she could get a closer look.

Adari soon realized that her plan, while reasonable, was wholly unsuited for a novice rider. Nink strained against her, taking her on a spiraling route to the top that wrenched her stomach. Dizzy, she fought to keep her eye on the cliff top. The figure from before was there, without the bright red light. But holding something else—

Something whizzed past, hurtling downward at such speed that Nink withdrew his wings in fear. Adari slipped for real this time, tumbling backward. Flailing, she caught the uvak's clawed foot with one arm on the way down—and desperately wrapped her other arm around it. "*Nink!*"

She strained to look up, but Nink was on the move, sailing away from the crest and its strange goings-on as fast as his reptile wings could carry them. Dangling, she saw that Nink was making for the safety of their earlier roost, farther up the chain. He'd obviously had enough surprises for one day.

So had she. But at least she was getting used to them.

Or so she thought.

* * *

Shortly before the sun slipped behind the western ocean, she watched the last wisps of smoke disappear from the mountaintop. Adari didn't think

Nink could be coaxed up there again before her water-pouch ran out. The dried brekka beets were already gone. She'd left so quickly she hadn't restocked her expedition pack.

Now, sitting on a ledge and watching the sunset, she drew an invisible continent on her knee, wondering how far she would have to fly to reach any settlement that had not heard of her plight. There probably wasn't such a place. The Neshtovar weren't just the peacekeepers and lawgivers, they were the communications system that made the far-flung continent of Keshtah one world. Circuit riders would have already spread the word from Tahv to the elder riders in each village. She had escaped, but freedom was no deliverance for her.

Deliverance.

The word reached her on the wind. It wasn't even a word, really—not one she had heard before. A strange, melodic combination of syllables that meant nothing to her ear. Yet her mind recognized it as a familiar concept: *deliverance*.

Instinctively, she looked back toward the mysterious peak, drowning in shadow. Lights winked in the darkness near its massive base. Fires—but not the uncontrolled fires that must have been present at the mountaintop. These fires had been set.

Adari sprang to her feet, losing her water-pouch over the edge. The Neshtovar! They'd hunted her here, and they'd camped, and in the morning, they'd find her! They wouldn't wait to find out what she'd seen atop the mountain, not when she'd compounded her crime by daring to fly Nink.

A breeze was blowing to the sea from the direction of the mountain. Cool, calming. *Deliverance*, came the word again. Another feeling followed, complex and emphatic: *We are yours—and you are ours*.

Adari blinked back bewildered tears and stepped toward the sleeping uvak. The wind rose again.

Come to us.

She'd been wrong to come here. The sky had told her to, but it didn't seem like any kind of deliverance Adari knew.

Her nose crinkled at the stench. The gully was dark, but it was clear something awful had been burned there. Even the sulfurous pits of the south weren't this bad. She looked back at Nink, yawning in the foliage and unwilling to follow her farther. *Wise animal*.

The active fires were ahead, through trees over the hill. Air caressed her as she crept up. Whatever they were burning, it wasn't what was in the gully.

In the clearing below, Adari saw them: people. As many people as had been at her final hearing, only gathered around multiple campfires. She again thought of the Neshtovar lying in wait for her. If so, then her arriving on foot was probably for the best. She strained to make out their voices as she approached. She recognized one, but not his words. She crept closer—

—and left her feet entirely, hurtling toward a tree. Flailing, Adari slammed hard against it, collapsing breathlessly at its base. Figures rushed at her from the shadows. Scrambling, she saw them—their bodies illuminated not by the fires, but from stalks of magenta energy emanating from their hands, just like she had seen before. She tripped over a root. *"No!"*

She never hit the ground. An unseen force yanked her through the maze of figures, depositing her abruptly before the largest bonfire. Rising, her back to the flames, she looked at the advancing wraiths. They were people, but not like her. Not purple, but beige, brown, red, and more—every color but what they were supposed to be. And some faces weren't like hers at all. Tiny tentacles wiggled on red jowls. A fat, leprous figure, twice as bulky as the rest and with a hide like Nink's, stood behind them all, grunting gutturally.

Adari screamed—but they weren't listening. They were all around her now, man, woman, and monster, shouting gibberish. She mashed her hands to her ears. It did no good. The words were digging past her ears. Digging at her mind.

Mental pinpricks became knives. Adari reeled. The strangers surged forward physically and ethereally—pushing, scraping, searching. Waves of images flashed before her, of her sons, her house, her people—everything that was Adari, everything that was Kesh. She still saw mouths moving, but the cacophony now boomed inside her head. Words, meaningless words ...

... that somehow began connecting with familiar impressions. As with the breeze before, the voices were alien, but she could feel the sounds coalescing around rational thoughts.

"You are here."

"There are others. There are others."

"Bring them here."

"Take us there!"

"Bring them here!"

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Adari spun, or all of Kesh did. Above her, the group parted for a new arrival. It was a woman. Darker-skinned than the others, she held a baby tightly swaddled in a red cloth. *Mother*, Adari thought against the clamorous assault. A sign of hope. Mercy.

"BRING THEM HERE BRING THEM HERE BRING THEM HERE!"

Adari screamed, writhing against the unseen claws raking at her. The others were holding back. The woman with the child was not. Adari reeled. She thought she saw the veined wings of Nink, flying overhead and away.

A hand appeared on the mother's shoulder from behind, drawing her back. The din faded from Adari's mind. She looked up to see—*Zhari Vaal?*

No, she realized, as her teary eyes focused. Another of the strangely clad figures, but short and stocky like her husband. She had once imagined Zhari at the bottom of the sea, his rich mauve color drained. This man was paler still, but his dark shock of hair and reddish brown eyes gave him a confident, compelling look. She had seen him before, on the mountain. She had heard him before, on the wind.

"Korsin," he said, simultaneously in her mind and with a voice as soothing as her grandfather's. He gestured to himself. "I am called Korsin."

Blackness closed around her.

Chapter Three

On her third day among the newcomers, Adari learned to talk.

She'd spent the first full day after the terrifying encounter asleep, if that was the right term for a feverish, nightmare slumber interrupted by brief patches of delirium. Several times, she'd opened her eyes only to shut them quickly on seeing the strangers hovering around her.

But they were tending to her, not harassing her—as she'd found the second morning, awakening between an impossibly soft blanket and the rough ground. The newcomers had found a secluded dry spot for her, with several figures sitting vigil. Adari had drunk the water they offered, but it didn't restore her voice. Her head still rang, her mind bruised by the earlier assault. None of her vocabulary came when called. She had forgotten how to speak.

Korsin was sitting with her when she finally remembered. He'd called over Hestus, a rust-colored figure with a shining mask covering part of his acid-scarred face. It almost looked like it was part *of* his face—various bits hiding under his skin. Adari had flinched in fear, but Hestus had simply sat calmly, listening as Korsin tried to talk with her.

And they talked. Awkwardly, at first, with Hestus piping in occasionally to repeat a new Keshiri word she had said, followed by his own language's equivalent. Adari had marveled. The Keshiri words Hestus spoke sounded exactly like what she'd said—in her own voice, even. Korsin had explained that Hestus's "special ear" gave him that talent, helping to speed along the exchange of information.

Adari was interested in that exchange, but most of the information had gone the other way. She gathered that the people Korsin led had indeed come from the silver shell, and that it had somehow fallen from the sky. It was also clear that, powerful as they were, they had no means of leaving the mountain now, isolated as it was by water and forbidding terrain. Korsin had listened with interest as she spoke about Kesh and the Keshiri, of uvak and villages on the mainland. She'd mentioned the Skyborn only once, before stopping in near embarrassment. She didn't know who the newcomers were, but she felt abashed bringing it up.

Now, on the third afternoon since her arrival, Adari was speaking comfortably with the newcomers—and had even picked up some words in their language herself. They were something called "Sith," and Korsin was "human." She repeated the words. "You're a good listener," Korsin said, encouraged. He said others had worked with her as she slept—he did not say how—to try to improve communications. Now they were progressing quickly, and it was not all their doing. Even overwrought, Adari remained sharp.

"Our immediate concern, Adari Vaal," Korsin said, emptying a glistening pouch of powder into a cup for her, "must be to reach the mainland." There wasn't food or shelter enough for his people here, and the mountain had sheer drop-offs to the sea below. Her uvak might have provided an exit for someone, but Nink, as fearful of the newcomers as he was of the mountain's native wildlife, had spent the last few days far out of reach, above.

Drinking the broth—it was filling, not unlike her mother's stew, she thought—Adari wrestled with the problem. Nink *might* come when she called, but only if she was standing in the open, alone. She could fly to land and return with help. "I couldn't take any riders, though." Nink might not appear if she was accompanied, and a novice rider could never carry a passenger in any event. "I'd have to go alone. But I'd return as soon as I could."

"She will not!"

Adari knew the voice before she even looked up. *The screamer*. The mother of the small child charged toward the smoldering campfire. “She will abandon us!”

Korsin rose and took the woman aside. Adari heard heated words exchanged, unfamiliar ones. But in bidding the woman away, he spoke words Adari did recognize: “We are her deliverance, and she is ours.”

Adari watched the woman, still glaring at her from afar. “She doesn’t like me.”

“Seelah?” Korsin shrugged. “She’s concerned over her mate—lost from the crash site. And with a child, she’s anxious to leave this mountain.” He smiled, offering to help Adari stand. “As a mother, I’m sure you understand.”

Adari gulped. She hadn’t mentioned her children. She’d barely even thought about them since she arrived among the newcomers, she realized. Shaking her head in guilt, she revealed something else: that the Keshiri might not listen to her.

Korsin seemed unsurprised—and unruffled. “You’re smart, Adari. You’ll make them listen.” He gently wrapped her shoulders with the azure blanket she’d slept beneath. “Keep this,” he said. “The sun’s setting soon. It could be a cold ride.”

Adari looked around. Seelah stood in silent fury, unmoved from before. The others Korsin had introduced eyed their leader nervously; red tentacle-jowled Ravilan exchanged a worried look with Hestus. Even the hulking Gloyd, who, despite his brutish appearance, was clearly Korsin’s greatest ally here, shifted uncomfortably. But no one barred her from leaving their campsite.

When a strong hand did stop her at the edge of the clearing, she was surprised to see whose it was: Korsin’s. “About the Keshiri,” Korsin said. “You told us about Tahv, your town—it sounds a good size. But how many are the Keshiri? How many Keshiri are there in all, I mean?”

Adari answered immediately. “We’re numberless.”

“Ah,” Korsin said, his posture softening. “You mean they have never been counted.”

“No,” Adari said. “I mean, *we don’t have a number that large*.”

Korsin froze, his grip on her arm tightening. His dark eyes, slightly smaller than a Keshiri’s, focused on the wilderness beyond. She’d never seen him unnerved. If this was it, it lasted less than a second before he stepped back.

“Before you leave,” he said, finding a tree to lean against, “tell me what you know about the Skyborn.”

Korsin had called the vessel he arrived in *Omen*. The word not only existed in the Keshiri tongue, but was a long-held favorite of the Neshtovar. Watching what was happening now on the plaza known as the Circle Eternal, Adari guessed even the uvak-riding chiefs were realizing the irony.

She had returned to Korsin after a single day, one full week after *Omen* had collided with the mountain—and with her life. It had been a simple matter for her to attract the uvak-riders there; as soon as the patrols spotted her and Nink, they followed the whole way to the Cetajan Range. The place had been the scene for several surprises in recent times, but none trumped the moment when the Neshtovar came upon Adari standing defiantly amid 240 supportive visitors from above, almost every one signaling his or her presence with a glowing ruby lightsaber. She didn’t have one of the strange devices, but she glowed just the same from within. Adari Vaal, collector of rocks and enemy of order was now Adari Vaal, discoverer and rescuer; answerer of the mountain’s call.

Add “prophet” to that, she thought as she watched the dozen score visitors—some hobbling from their ordeal—enter the Circle Eternal. They passed between gawking, silent crowds of Keshiri, many of the same people from her door the week before. Ahead in the Circle, all the Neshtovar in the region were present, more than she’d ever seen. Three days of aerial rescue operations had brought the newcomers off the mountain, days in which the word had gone out far into the hinterlands.

The Skyborn had arrived on Kesh.

No lesser reason could explain why the Keshiri riders compliantly took their positions not in the Circle Eternal itself, but along the raised perimeter. The villagers had watched Adari’s hearing from here; now the Neshtovar were watching her in the Circle, marching along behind Korsin. Behind them, the visitors filed in, forming their own inner perimeter over which the Neshtovar strained to see.

Izri Dazh looked small, standing beneath the column three times his height that served as the sundial’s gnomon. Normally, it made him seem larger. Not today. He limped forward and greeted Korsin and company with mawkish words of praise before turning to the audience. Straining to see over the line of visitors, Izri made the declaration official. These *were* the

Skyborn, he said, come down from the very mountain from which their servants had brought back the law centuries earlier. It wasn't the same mountain, Adari knew; perhaps the texts would be changed later. But Izri ignored that detail for now. The visitors had established their identities to the satisfaction of all of the Neshtovar, he said.

"You didn't believe them when they levitated your cane," Adari whispered, unable to resist.

"That ended when they levitated *me*," Izri rasped, under his breath. He turned back to see the villagers cheering—not for his proclamation, but for Yaru Korsin, Grand Lord of the Skyborn, who had just physically leapt the distance to the top of the column.

When the cheering finally died down, Korsin spoke in the Keshiri words that his interlocutor, the honored Adari Vaal, Daughter of the Skyborn, had taught him that morning. "We *have* come from above, as you say," he said, deep voice carrying to all. "We have come to visit the land that was a piece of us, and the people of that land. And Kesh has welcomed us."

More cheering. "We will found ... a *temple* atop the mountain of discovery," he continued. "We will be many months in labors there, tending to the vessel that brought us and communing with the heavens. And in that time, we will make our home here in Tahv, with our children—aided by the Neshtovar, who were such good stewards here in our absence. They will leave here today, taking wing to all corners of Kesh, to spread the word of our arrival, and find the artisans we require." He spoke over the applause. "We are the Skyborn—and we *will* return to the stars!"

Happy chaos. Adari's younger son, Tona, squirmed against her. She spied her mother and Finn at an honored place just outside the Circle, beaming happily. Adari looked up at Korsin—and swallowed hard.

It was all so perfect.

And all so wrong.

Chapter Four

The rapturous mood of the Keshiri lasted straight through Moving Day. The Skyborn had been quartered in the fine homes of the Neshtovar while the riders spread the word. As the Neshtovar returned one by one, their guests uniformly declared their preference to remain in the relatively sumptuous accommodations. After the sixth rider appealed to Izri, the elder declared that *all* riders should move their families to humbler homes, that the Skyborn might know their devotion. Korsin and Seelah had been living in Izri's own house since the first day.

Everyone moved but Adari. For her service to the Skyborn, she'd been allowed to remain in Zhari's house. It also kept her near Korsin, whom she saw daily in her informal role as ambassador and aide. She saw all the prominent Skyborn often: gruff but amiable Gloyd, who was something called a Houk; Hestus, busily indexing the Keshiri vocabulary; and rust-colored Ravilan, who often seemed lost, a minority within a minority. She also saw Seelah, who had installed herself in Korsin's lavish lodgings. Seelah's child was Korsin's nephew, Adari learned.

Seelah always glowered at Adari when she was around Korsin. Including today, as Adari stood with him at a dig on the edge of the Cetajan Range, in sight of the ocean she fled to a month before. The Skyborn needed structures to stabilize and protect *Omen*, but first they needed a clear land passage onto the peninsula. A route was taking shape with the Skyborn, whose number included many miners, hewing huge chunks of strata with their lightsabers.

“Sabers’ll do better when we recover some of the Lignan crystals to power them,” Gloyd said. Korsin presented a rock sample to Adari. Granite. The efforts were not for her, of course, but she’d always wondered what the mountains were made of. Now she knew.

“You were right after all,” Korsin said, watching her study the stone. She hadn’t mentioned her conflict with the Neshtovar, but she’d been anxious to confirm her theories with someone who knew. Volcanos *did* form new land. And the mountains of the Cetajan Range weren’t volcanoes—while granite did come from magma, they told her, it was formed far underground over the course of eons. That was why its rocks looked different from the flimestones. “I don’t understand half what my miners tell me,” Korsin said, “but they say you could easily help them—if you weren’t helping me.”

Korsin began speaking with Gloyd about their next project, a dig to find metals necessary to repair *Omen*. Adari started to interject when she saw Seelah orbiting. Adari shuddered as the woman passed from sight. What had Adari done to earn such hatred?

She’s not staring at me, Adari realized. *She’s staring at Korsin.*

“I saw you,” Adari blurted to Korsin.

“What?”

“I saw you a second time on the mountain, that day. You threw something over the side.”

Korsin turned from his work. He gestured—and Gloyd stepped away.

“I saw you throw something,” Adari said, swallowing. She looked down at the ocean, crashing against the cliffs. “I didn’t know what—until you sent me to return to the village.” Korsin stepped warily toward her. Adari couldn’t stop talking. “I flew down there, Korsin. I saw him below, on the rocks. He was a man,” she said, “like you.”

“Like me?” Korsin snorted. “Is ... he still there?”

She shook her head. “I turned him over to look at him,” she said. “The tide swept him away.”

Korsin was her height, but as she shrank, he loomed. “You saw this—and yet you still brought the Neshtovar to find us.”

Adari froze, unable to answer. She looked at the rocks, far below, so like the ones farther up the range. Korsin reached for her as he had before ...

... and drew back. His voice softened. “Your people turned on you to protect their society. You were a danger?”

How did he know? Adari looked up at Korsin. He looked less like Zhari all the time. “I believed something they didn’t.”

Korsin smiled and took her hand gently. “That’s a fight my people are familiar with. That man you saw—he was a danger to *our* society.”

“But he was your *brother*.”

Korsin’s grip tightened for a moment before he let go altogether. “You *are* a good listener,” he said, straightening. The fact wouldn’t have been hard to learn. “Yes, he was my brother. But he was a danger—and we had dangers enough when you found us,” he said. He looked deeply into her eyes. “And I think this is something you know something about, Adari. That same sea took someone from you, too. Didn’t it?”

Adari’s mouth opened. *How?* Zhari had died there, but the Neshtovar would never have told Korsin. Speaking of a rider’s fall broke their greatest taboo: falling was being claimed by the Otherside. No one had seen it happen, save for Nink—and the all-seeing *Skyborn*.

Korsin was either a mind reader, or he was who he said he was. Her words barely came out. “It—it’s not the same. *You* pushed that man. I didn’t have anything to do with what happened to my—”

“Of course you didn’t. Accidents happen. But you didn’t mind that he died,” he said. “I can see it in you, Adari. He was a danger to you—to the person you’re becoming.” Korsin’s bushy eyebrows turned up. “You’re glad he’s gone.”

Adari closed her eyes. Putting his arm around her shoulder, Korsin turned her toward the sun. “It’s all right, Adari. Among the Sith, there is no shame in it. You would never be what you are today with him keeping you down. Just as you’d never be what you’re going to become with *Izri Dazh* keeping you down.”

At the name, Adari’s eyes opened. The sunlight dazzled her, but Korsin wouldn’t let her turn away. “You were afraid of us,” he said, “and afraid when you saw the body. You knew we’d die on the mountain if you didn’t

bring help. Yet you brought the Neshtovar anyway—because you thought we could help you against them.”

He released her. Adari looked blankly at the sun for another moment before looking away. Behind her, Korsin spoke in the soothing tones he’d used when his voice had first reached her on the wind.

“Helping us interact with the Keshiri is not just about helping *us*, Adari. You will learn things about your world that you never imagined.” He turned over the rock in her hand. “I don’t know how long we’re going to be here, but I promise you will learn more in the next few months than you have in your entire lifetime. Than *any* Keshiri has.”

Adari shook. “What—what do you—”

“A simple thing. Forget what you saw that day.”

Korsin made good on his word. In her first months with the Skyborn, Adari had learned much about her home. But she had also learned some things about where *they* had come from, and who they were. She was a good listener. *By simple things, we know the world.*

Korsin’s Sith were the beings from above that she denied—but they weren’t the gods of Keshiri legend. Not exactly. They had amazing powers, and perhaps they lived in the stars. But they didn’t bleed sand, and they weren’t perfect. They argued. They envied. They killed.

The Sith did read minds, to a degree. Korsin had used that to call out to her for help after seeing her in the air. But they weren’t omniscient. She’d found that out with a simple, surreptitious experiment involving Ravilan. She’d suggested he visit a restaurant deep in Tahv’s busiest quarter. Off he went, getting lost in the same neighborhood she always got lost in. The Sith’s perceptive powers were amazing, but they still required accurate knowledge from others.

She sought to provide that, accompanying Korsin to many work sites, mostly employing jovial Keshiri laborers. The Skyborn were perfect enough for the Keshiri—and perfect enough for her. Yaru Korsin was as far beyond Zhari Vaal in intellect as she was above the rocks, and as long as she learned to avoid the eye of Seelah, another widow of a fallen man, she could expect to learn a great deal more.

At the same time her knowledge advanced, Izri’s faith was further glorified. Adari took little joy in that, apart from the occasional chuckle she got from having a more storied role in it than Izri had. She was the

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Discoverer, always to be remembered by Keshiri society. No one would remember Izri.

Watching another quarry being constructed, she wondered what that society would look like. She knew something the Sith didn't: They'd be here for a long time. She'd mentioned it once to a miner, who promptly discounted it as advice from the local know-nothings.

But she knew. The metals the Sith sought weren't in the soil of Kesh. Scholars had scoured every part of the continent. They had recorded what they'd found. If the substances Korsin's people required hid farther beneath the surface, it would take time to find them—a *lot* more time.

Time, the Sith had.

What, she wondered, would the Keshiri have?

Paragon

Chapter One

4985 BBY

The water was as warm as it was every day, streaming from the marble slot high on the wall down onto Seelah's body. There had been no refresher, no modern conveniences for the Sith stranded on Kesh for fifteen standard years. But they had learned to live with what they had.

The glistening droplets of meltwater clinging to her brown skin had come from a glacier half a continent away. Keshiri uvak-fliers, their beasts laden with massive kegs, had ferried the water from that faraway place to the Sith's mountain retreat. Rooftop attendants heated the water to her exact specifications, channeling it through a system thoroughly cleansed daily for mildew and other pollutants.

Below, Seelah meticulously raked at her wrist with pumice brought from the foot of the Sessal Spire, kilometers away. Keshiri artists had crafted the stones into pleasing shapes for her. The natives were more interested in appearance than function—but, in this, they had an ally. Seelah looked with her usual disdain at the stall, constructed for her personal use by her Sith brethren immediately after she'd moved into Captain Korsin's chambers. The place was more a temple than a home.

Well, she couldn't have everything. Not here.

Fifteen years. That's what it was by the Keshiri calendar, too—although who could trust that? She stepped dripping from the shower, wondering where the time had gone. Not to her body, she saw in the colossal mirror—working glass was another thing the Keshiri were good at. Twice a mother and living on food suited for farm animals back home, and yet Seelah looked as fit as she ever had. It had taken work. But time was one thing she'd had.

"I know you're here, Tilden," Seelah said. Tilden Kaah, her Keshiri attendant, always stayed out of sight from the mirror, never remembering she could sense him through the Force. Now he stood by the doorway, averting his large opal eyes and presenting a robe in his shaking hands.

Fifteen years hasn't changed him, either, Seelah thought with a silent chortle as she snatched the robe. But why shouldn't he look? All that drab purple skin—to call it lavender was flattery. And white hair—the color of age and uselessness. If Keshiri had found other Keshiri beautiful before, it was only because they hadn't yet seen the Sith.

And, besides, it was Tilden's job to worship her. One of the younger high priests of the Keshiri faith—which recognized Seelah and her fellow Sith as ancient deities from the heavens—Tilden lived to follow her everywhere. She rather enjoyed torturing him like this in the mornings. She was the sacrilege that started his day.

"Your son is hunting with the riders until tonight," he said. "Your daughter is in Tahv with the educators your people sent."

"Fine, fine," she said, discarding the gown he'd set out in favor of a brighter one. "Get to something important."

"Milady is expected in the ward this afternoon for the reviewing," he said, looking up from his parchment. Finding her fully dressed and standing before the great window, he smiled gently. "Otherwise, you are at your leisure."

"And the Grand Lord?"

"His Eminence, our savior from above, has begun his meetings with his advisers. The usual people, born on high like milady. His giant friend is there, too." He looked down at his notes. "Oh, and the *crimson man* has asked for an audience."

"Crimson man?" Seelah's gaze remained on the foaming ocean far below. "Ravilan?"

"Yes, milady."

"Then I should go." Seelah stretched mightily before turning abruptly to search for her shoes. Tilden had them. They were the only articles of clothing rescued from the crash of *Omen* that she continued to use. The Keshiri still hadn't figured out decent footwear.

"I—I didn't mean to turn this into a working day so early," Tilden stammered, fastening her shoes. "Forgive me. Were you finished bathing? I could have the minders recycle the water."

"Relax, Tilden—I *want* to go out," she said, pinning back her dark hair with a sculpted bone clip, a gift from some local noble she couldn't remember. She paused in the polished doorway. "But have the team step up the water deliveries—and have them bring it in from the far side of the mountain range. It's better for the skin from over there."

Seelah yawned. It wasn't even high sun and the daily pantomime was already well under way. Captain Yaru Korsin, the Keshiri's savior from above, sat in his old bridge chair, listening just as he used to on the command deck of *Omen*. But now the shattered wreck of the vessel lay behind him, sheltered in a part of the sturdy structure not used for habitation, and his battered chair was incongruously plopped in the middle of a marbled colonnade, stretching out hundreds of meters. Here, high in the open air of the Takara Mountains—recently renamed for his precious mother, wherever in blazes she was—Korsin held court.

The architecture and location made for a good show for the Keshiri townsfolk who occasionally flew up here. That was according to design. But it was also big enough to accommodate every foolish supplicant that Korsin wanted to cram into his day. Seelah saw Gloyd the gunner, Korsin's "giant friend," at the front of the line as usual.

The lumpy-headed Houk's jowls quaked as he presented his latest crazed idea: using one of the surviving boring lasers that still had a charge to fire signals into space. *Boring* seemed the right word to Seelah—and Korsin didn't appear enthralled, either. How long must Gloyd have been prattling before she arrived?

"It'll work this time," Gloyd said, mottled skin sweating. "All we've got to do is get the attention of a passing freighter. An observatory. *Anything*." He wiped his forehead. Seelah never thought the genetic lottery had been kind to Houks to begin with. But now it looked as if age and sun were causing Gloyd's hide to melt from his skull.

"The intensity will dissipate to the inverse of the square of the distance from Kesh," came a human voice from behind Korsin. Parrah, *Omen's* relief navigator and now their main science adviser, stepped forward. "It'd be just more cosmic background noise. Didn't they teach you anything where you came from?"

Probably not, Seelah mused. Gloyd had been a castaway even before he joined the *Omen* crew. While other outsiders avoided the Stygian Caldera, Gloyd's team of brigands had figured something truly amazing must be there. There was: the Sith Empire. Few of Gloyd's companions had survived the discovery. But as gunner and foot soldier, he'd done combat with Jedi plenty of times in his earlier life, making him useful to Naga Sadow and, later, to Yaru Korsin.

But lately? Not so much. "I don't think it's going to work, old friend," Korsin said, spying Seelah out of the corner of his eye and winking. "And we just can't run the risk of burning out any more equipment. You know the score."

They all did. Even as they built their stone shelter for *Omen* in the months after the crash, the crew had steadily brought out equipment. Some of it they expected to restore to life with a few fabricated parts; the rest was immediately usable. And used.

That had been a mistake. It turned out there wasn't any metal to be found on Kesh. The Sith had ripped and clawed at the surface, expending most of their surviving munitions to no avail. Above, Kesh was pleasing to the eye—but below, it appeared to be little more than a dirtball. Much equipment running on internal power sputtered and died. Worse, something in Kesh's electromagnetic field was playing hob with everything from radio waves to electrical generation. The lightsabers still worked—thank the Lignan crystals for that—but the castaways, intrepid as they were at cannibalizing, weren't going to be able to reinvent everything. The tools simply weren't here.

"I get that," Gloyd said, seeming not so tall as before. "You know me. I'm built for battle. This peaceful paradise is getting to me—"

"I know something you can do battle with," Seelah said, her caftan shimmering as she stepped up and put her arm around Korsin. "I think I saw them preparing lunch back in the main hall." Korsin smiled.

Gloyd glared at the couple for a moment before letting loose with a churning laugh. "What can I say?" he said, patting his paunch and turning. "The lady knows me."

Korsin looked past the retreating hulk to see another figure. “Ravilan! What’s *your* next grand plan to get us off this rock?”

“Nothing along those lines,” Ravilan said. The crimson man of Tilden’s description stepped forward and regarded his leader civilly. “Not today.”

“Really? Well, we’re all getting older. The mind forgets.”

“Not this one, Captain.” Ravilan ran his finger along his right cheek tendril—an expression of thoughtfulness among the Red Sith. It made Seelah’s skin crawl. She gripped Korsin tighter. Onetime quartermaster for *Omen*’s complement of Massassi warriors, Ravilan had been left without a mission after his charges died during their first days on Kesh. Since then, he’d held a sequence of odd jobs. More important, he’d become the spokes-being for the Fifty-seven—the surviving crew members whose bloodlines to the red-skinned Sith species ran truest—and for those who, like Gloyd, were less interested in living on Kesh than leaving it.

But Ravilan’s lot had grown increasingly bleak. His people hadn’t numbered fifty-seven since their arrival. A dozen had fallen due to accident or professional incompetence—and none of the children of Ravilan’s people had lived a day. Kesh had not been kind in equal measure to all its guests. As motives for wanting to leave went, his were fairly strong.

But they did not bring him before Korsin today, apparently. “There’s something else,” Ravilan said, eyeing Seelah. “People in the service of your ... your *wife* have been trying to document the ancestries of all our crew. They have grown quite insistent,” he added, cocking an eyebrow-stalk.

Feeling Seelah’s grip tighten further, Korsin rose. “Your people don’t have to worry about that, Rav. Human crew only.”

“Yes, but many of us have at least some human blood,” Ravilan said, walking along the colonnade with Korsin. The crowd parted; Seelah walked gingerly behind. “And many of your people have some of ours. The merger of the Dark Jedi line with that of my Sith forebears is an article of pride to my—to *our* people, Korsin. To have someone picking it apart—”

Korsin continued walking, enjoying the view of the ocean. Strands of silver in his hair glistening in the sun. Seelah stepped up her pace to get closer. “It’s still a foreign planet,” Korsin said. “We don’t know what killed your Massassi when we landed. We don’t know what’s been happening to—well, you know.”

“I certainly do,” Ravilan said, looking out at the ocean without seeming to see it. His coloring had faded to a somber maroon hue in his time on

Kesh, and his earrings and other Sithly ornamentation only served to make the man beneath look more drab. “This is a world driven by tragedy, Korsin. For *all* of us. If you’d accept one of my people in the crèche as midwife, we might be better able to understand why our children have been—”

“No!” Seelah said, interposing herself between the two. “They’re not medical personnel, Korsin. In conditions like these, we’ve got to have some controls!”

Ravilan shrank back. “It was not a slight, Seelah. Your staff have done quite well since our mission turned ... *generational* in nature. The Sith thrive.” His face, wrinkled with age and worry, softened. “It should be so for *all* of the Sith.”

Seelah looked urgently at Korsin, who waved his hand dismissively. *Dismissing us both?* she wondered. “We’ll talk about it later,” Korsin said. “Was there something else?”

Ravilan paused. “Yes—I will be in the south, as you requested, visiting the towns of the Ragnos Lakes.” Seelah knew the project: The Keshiri had been harvesting some kind of fluorescent algae, and Korsin had assigned Ravilan to check it out, for potential use in lighting the Sith structures. “There are eight villages on various bodies of water, all with different specimens to examine.”

“That’s a lot of territory,” Korsin said. “You alone?”

“As you requested,” Ravilan said. “I start in Tetsubal, farthest away.”

Seelah smiled. It was just the sort of mindless job that would drive the quartermaster to madness.

“Take your whole retinue,” Korsin said, slapping a firm hand on Ravilan’s shoulder. Korsin had grown no more physically imposing during his exile, but he still walked like a man Gloyd’s size. “It’s important—and it’ll go faster if you split up. And you could *all* stand to get off this mountain for a few days.”

He brought Ravilan closer and spoke into his sunken ear. “And, look—next time Seelah would like you to call me Grand Lord.”

“That’s just a name for the Keshiri.”

“And there are Keshiri here. It’s an order, Rav. Safe flight.”

Seelah watched as Ravilan limped off. He’d lost an argument with an uvak in their second year here. It was one of a series of losses—and she wasn’t about to let him win an argument now. She took Korsin aside. “Don’t you *dare* accept any of his people in my wards!”

“You’re pretty when you’re territorial.”

“Korsin!”

He looked at her with piercing eyes. “You’re not living on Rhelg anymore. How long before you let go of the past?”

Seelah let a smoldering look speak for her—but Korsin ignored it. Spotting someone behind her, he grinned and turned to address the waiting crowd. “Sorry to cut this short, all of you—but I see my lunch companion has arrived.”

Seelah turned.

Adari Vaal waited at the edge of the plaza.

Chapter Two

The Sith Empire of Seelah's youth was a nest of star systems linked by common heritage, ambition, and greed. It was also, in a sense, a black hole from which little escaped.

The Stygian Caldera's limiting effects on hyperspace travel were disproportionate, making it far easier for unlucky outsiders to wander into Sith space than for the Sith Lords to venture out. Those who found their way in seldom returned, becoming slaves to one princeling or another. The arrivals frequently changed hands over the generations, forgetting their homes completely. They, too, were of the Sith now.

Some Sith Lords, such as Naga Sadow, saw value in the work of the human descendants of the original Tapani refugees. Where their tentacle-faced masters with lineages back to the Sith species were more interested in sorceries, Seelah's people excelled at science. When allowed to practice, they did, forming the industrial and medical infrastructures for several Lords. Some even resolved problems of lightsaber-crystal fabrication and power generation that had eluded the Jedi of the Republic. Such feats were never heralded—no Sith Lord would share a new weapon. If failure was an orphan, success, for the Sith, was a secret love child.

The child Seelah had her own successes, serving on Rbelg with the rest of her family in the forces of Ludo Kressh, Sadow's greatest rival. At thirteen, Seelah was already a talented healer, drawing both on the Force and the medical knowledge of her forebears. Devotion had already borne fruit.

"We are advancing in this movement," her father had said. "You have done well, and it has been rewarded. Glory in the honor, Seelah—it is the greatest that can befall such as us."

She had been charged with the care of Lord Kressh's feet.

They were out all afternoon again, the two of them. Korsin and the Keshiri woman. Tilden had told Seelah that, and she had other confidants who provided regular reports. Her husband and his so-called "ambassador," Adari, would stroll the pathways painstakingly carved out of the once treacherous mountainside, discussing—what? Not a blasted lot, as far as Seelah could tell.

Adari's walks with Korsin dated from the beginning of Seelah's own relationship with him. Back then, there had been a need. The Vaal woman had discovered the Sith on the mountain, and had acted as intermediary with the Keshiri. But as years progressed and the need for a single ambassador ebbed, the walks continued, ranging ever farther away. After the birth of Seelah and Korsin's daughter, Nida, his walks with Adari had become daily—including the occasional uvak-flight.

Seelah knew enough from her sources not to suspect infidelity—as if she would care—but the native woman had taken steps to improve her plain appearance. Adari had recently begun turning up in vor'shandi face markings, a decoration unheard of for a Keshiri widow of an uvak-rider. But eavesdroppers confirmed for Seelah that the generally mindless substance of their discussions hadn't changed. *Where does the sun go at night, Korsin? Is air part of the Force, Korsin? Why are rocks not food, Korsin?* If she was a spy, she was pretty useless at it—but she did have command of a huge chunk of the Grand Lord's time. And more.

"She's ... really something, isn't she?" he had asked in an unguarded moment after Adari flew back to Tahv one evening.

"I think your standards for playthings have plummeted," Seelah had responded.

"Along with my ship."

And my real husband, she had not said. Seelah thought back on that moment now as she stood outside the ward. Fifteen years with her beloved husband's hated brother. Fifteen years with the man who had probably orphaned her son. *Let the old purple wraith have him*, she thought. The less seen of Yaru Korsin, the better.

Korsin's seduction of Seelah had not taken long at all, once she'd convinced him he'd be met with something other than a dagger. It was an acceptable arrangement on both sides. By winning her approval, the commander had solidified his bonds with the restive miners his ship was carrying—and stripped away something that had belonged to his hated sibling. She even let him think it was his idea, though she bit her lip to ribbons that first year.

For her part, Seelah won power and influence in the new order—benefits going far beyond convenient morning ablutions. Little Jariad would be raised in the best lodgings wherever they were—first in the walled native city of Tahv, later in the mountain compound.

And she had a job. Administration of the Sith sick wards seemed like a worthless sinecure given the rude health of the Keshiri-pampered people. Certainly no one else wanted the assignment, not with a world to conquer and an interstellar escape to engineer. Most Sith injured in disagreements never reached a healer, anyway.

But Seelah got to know more about the Sith who were stranded on Kesh than anyone, including the *Omen* officer originally responsible for keeping the ranks. She knew who was born and when and to whom—and that was the balance of power. The others weren't even looking. Their eyes were still on the sky, on getting out. Only Korsin seemed to understand that they might be settling into a permanent situation—though he clearly worked to prevent anyone but Seelah from sensing it. She didn't understand why he had been open with her about it.

Perhaps the wife of Yaru Korsin didn't merit hope. No matter. She didn't need it, anyway. She saw the future—here in the assembly yard behind the ward, as she walked through on her periodic reviews. Here, the youth of the Sith reported to see her. Or rather, to be seen.

"This is Ebya T'dell, daughter of the miner Nafjan and the bridge cadet Kanika." Seelah's willowy aide, Orlenda, stood behind a stern-faced pink child and read from a parchment. "Eight years old next month by our counting. No ailments."

Seelah's hand closed in a V around the young girl's chin. Seelah looked left and right, inspecting the child like livestock. "High cheekbones," she said, mashing her index finger against the youngling's face. The child didn't flinch. "I know your parents, girl. Are you a source of despair to them?"

"No, Lady Seelah."

"This is good. And what is your duty?"

"To be like you, milady."

"Not the answer I had in mind, but I won't argue," Seelah said, releasing the child and turning to Orlenda, her aide. "I don't see any flaring of the skull, but I'm concerned about her coloring," she said. "Too florid. Check the genealogy again. She might yet have a family, if we choose properly."

With a pat on the rear from Orlenda, eight-year-old Ebya T'dell returned to play in the outer yard, momentarily safe in the knowledge that her life might not be a genetic dead end.

It was an important matter, Seelah thought as she watched the younglings duel with hejarbo staffs. Every child there had been born since the crash landing. Apart from the infusion of youth to the Sith population, it appeared that very little had changed. Every color from humanity's spectrum had been represented in the original *Omen* crew, and that continued to be the case. None of the casual pairings with Keshiri had produced any offspring whatsoever—Seelah thanked the dark side for that—and, of course, there was the problem with Ravilan's people. The number of relatively pure-blooded humans had been steadily increasing. So had the purity of that blood.

She had seen to that—with Korsin's full approval. It was sensible. Kesh had killed the Massassi. If it had not killed humans yet, then the Sith needed more humans. *Adapt or die*, Korsin had said.

"There were several more younglings on the list for this week," Orlenda said. "Did you want to see them today, Seelah?"

"I'm not in the mood. Is there anything else?"

Orlenda rolled up her parchment and shooed the remaining children to the exercise yard. "Well," she said, "we'll need a new Keshiri bearer for the wardroom."

"What happened to the last one, Orlenda?" Seelah smirked. "Did you finally kill him with your kindnesses?"

"No—but he *is* dead."

"The big one? Gosem?"

"*Gorem*," Orlanda said with a sigh. "Yes, he died last week. We'd loaned him to Ravilan's team breaking down one of the decks of *Omen*, looking for whatever it is they look for to use. Gorem was, well, you remember, so *strong*—"

"Get to it."

"I guess he'd been moving heavy plates, and it's hot up there under that roof. He keeled over right outside the ship." Orlanda clicked her tongue.

"Hmm." She'd thought the Keshiri were made of stronger stuff. Still, it was a good chance to rib her lusty friend. "I imagine you wept at the funeral pyre?"

"No, they tossed him over the cliff," Orlanda said, straightening her flaxen hair. "It was that day with the high winds."

Just before dusk, Seelah found Korsin again on the plaza. His Keshiri plaything was gone, and Korsin was looking at himself—or, rather, at a pretty bad replica. Crafters from Tahv had just delivered a four-meter-tall not-very-likeness of their savior, sculpted from an enormous slab of glass.

"It's ... a first pass," Korsin said, sensing her arrival.

"Clearly." Seelah thought it would befoul the killing fields of Ashas Ree. But her Keshiri aide thought it was marvelous. At a minimum.

"It's positively *stupendous*, milady," Tilden said. "Something truly worthy of the Skyborn—I mean, the *Protectors*." He corrected himself quickly in the presence of the Grand Lord, but still seemed to swallow hard at the new word, so recently added to the religion of his birth.

Ravilan's cousin, the cyborg Hestus, had worked for years with other linguists from the *Omen* to plumb the oral histories of the Keshiri. They'd sought any hint that anyone had ever happened by—anyone who might return to Kesh again, to provide them escape. They hadn't found much. The Neshtovar, the uvak-riders who until recently had ruled the planet, had layered their religion of the Skyborn and the opposing Otherside over earlier tales of Protectors and Destructors. The Destructors periodically returned to rain disaster upon Kesh; the Protectors were destined to stop them, once and for all. Korsin, now at the focus of the Keshiri faith, had claimed a moment of revelation and decreed a return to the old names.

That, like much else over the years, had been Seelah's idea. The Neshtovar had considered themselves the Sons of the Skyborn. But no living Keshiri could claim kinship to the distant Protectors. Whatever status any native

previously enjoyed was gone. And now, Seelah saw, the Keshiri were showing their respect with bug-eyed slabs of glass.

They'd better learn to get our faces right before they "respect" me, Seelah thought. "It's not that it looks bad," she said, once Tilden had stepped away. "It's that it doesn't look right *here*."

"Thinking again of moving us from the mountain?" Korsin smiled, wind-cracked wrinkles darkening in the shadows. "I think we wore out the Keshiri's patience when we stayed in Tahv the first time."

"And what difference does that make?"

"None." He grabbed her hand, surprising her. "Listen, I want to tell you how much I appreciate the work you've been doing at the ward. It's everything I hoped—everything I knew you were capable of."

"Oh, I don't think you know what I'm capable of."

Korsin looked away and laughed. "Well, let's not pursue that. Would dinner interest you instead?" His eyes shone. Seelah recognized the look. The man was capable, as ever, of keeping multiple sets of accounts.

Before she could answer, a shout came from above. Korsin and Seelah looked to the watchtower. No attacker threatened—the Sith had purged the range of predators years before. Instead, sentries simply sat in meditation, listening to the Force for messages from Sith traveling in the far-flung reaches of the land.

"It's Ravilan," called down a young red-faced sentry, only a child when *Omen* crashed. "Something has happened in Tetsubal. Something bad."

Korsin looked up in aggravation. He could feel something in the Force, too—something chaotic—but he had no idea what. This was exactly why they shouldn't have pirated their personal communicators in an earlier escape scheme.

Seelah looked up at the tower and mouthed, "Is ... is Ravilan dying?"

"No," the herald said, barely catching her words. "*Everyone else is.* "

Chapter Three

The Sith were about glorification of self and the subjugation of others. That much made sense, as the young Seelah saw life in Ludo Kressh's palace.

What did not make sense was why so many of her people—in her own family!—embraced the Sith teachings when they had no hope of advancement. Why would a Sith live as a slave?

It wasn't that way for everyone. In the grand scheme, the Sith Empire had been at rest for many years, but an empire of Sith is an empire of small schemes. From Kressh's command, newly adult Seelah had watched her master rage at the ventures of Naga Sadow. She had seen Sadow at several meetings in Kressh's company, almost all of them ending in fury. The two leaders differed on everything, long before the discovery of a space lane into the heart of the Republic set them at odds over the future direction of the Sith Empire.

Sadow was a visionary. He knew permanent isolation was a practical impossibility in an Empire comprising so many systems and so many potential hyperspace routes; the Stygian Caldera was a veil, not a wall, and he could see opportunity through it. And in Sadow's entourage, Seelah had seen many humans and members of other species with apparent status. She even met Korsin's captain father once.

For Sadom, contact with the new was a thing to be desired—and outsiders could be as Sith as any born in the Empire. For Kressh, who spent his days in battle and his nights toiling on a magical device to protect his young son from all harm, there could not be a worse fate than escape from the Sith's cosmic cradle.

"Do you know why I do this?" Kressh had asked one night. His drunken rage had touched the entire household, Seelah included. "I have seen the holocrons—I know what waits beyond. My son looks like me—and so does the future of the Sith.

"But only as long as we're here. Out there," he'd spat, between bloody punches, "out there, the future looks like you."

Adari Vaal had once told Korsin that the Keshiri did not have a number large enough to describe their own population. The *Omen* crew had tried to make estimates in their initial years on Kesh, only to find ever more villages over the horizon. Tetsubal, at eighteen thousand Keshiri residents, had been one of the last cities counted before the Sith finally gave up.

Now they had given up again. The walls of Tetsubal were filled with corpses, making a body count impossible. As they arrived on uvak-back that night, Seelah, Korsin, and their companions could see the dead Keshiri from the sky, littering the dirt roads like branches after a storm. Some had collapsed within the doorways of their hejarbo-shoot huts. It was the same inside, they soon saw.

What they didn't see were survivors. If any existed, they were hiding well.

Eighteen thousand bodies was a good guess.

Whatever happened had happened suddenly. A nursing woman had fallen, locked together with her infant in a fatal embrace. Troughs laced through the streets, fed from the aqueduct; several Keshiri had fallen in and drowned right beside their floating woven pails.

Alive and alone here stood Ravilan, rattled and clinging inside the still-locked city gate. He had held his position in Tetsubal throughout the evening, looking much the worse for it. Korsin approached him as soon as he dismounted.

"It started after I met with my contacts here," Ravilan said. "People started collapsing in restaurants, in the markets. Then the panic began."

"And where were *you* during all this?"

Ravilan pointed to the town circle, a plaza with a large sundial much like the one in Tahv. It was the tallest structure in the city, apart from the uvak-driven pulley system that fed the aqueduct. "I couldn't find the aide I'd

brought with me. I leapt up there to call for her—and to survey what was going on.”

“Surveying,” Seelah snarled. “Really!”

Ravilan exhaled angrily. “Yes, I was trying to get clear! Who knows what plague these people might be carrying? I was up there for hours, watching people drop. I called for my uvak, but it was dead, too.”

“Tether ours outside the walls,” Korsin ordered. He looked flustered in the torchlight. He pulled a cloth from his tunic and placed it over his mouth, not seeming to realize he was the last in the party to do so. He looked at Seelah. “Biological agent?”

“I—I can’t say,” she said. Her work had been with the Sith, never the Keshiri. Who knew what they might be susceptible to?

Korsin tugged at Gloyd. “My daughter’s in Tahv. Make sure she gets back to the mountain,” he said. “Go!”

The Houk, uncharacteristically shaken, bolted for his mount.

“It could be airborne,” Seelah said, walking dazed through the corpses. That would explain how it had hit so many, so quickly. “But we haven’t been affected—”

A cry came from up ahead. There, Seelah saw what their scout had found beneath another body: Ravilan’s missing assistant. The woman was in her forties, like Seelah. Human—and dead.

Seelah clutched the gauze over her face. *Fool, fool—I’m a fool! Is it already too late?*

“It’s late enough,” Ravilan said, catching her unguarded thought. He confronted Korsin. “You know what you have to do.”

Korsin spoke in a monotone. “We’ll burn the city. Of course, we’ll burn it.”

“It’s not enough, Captain. We have to shut them out!”

“Shut *who* out?” Seelah snapped.

“The Keshiri!” Ravilan gestured to the bodies around them. “There is something killing them and it can kill us! We’ve got to remove them from our lives once and for all!”

Korsin looked completely taken aback.

Seelah grabbed his shoulder. “Don’t listen to this. How will we live without them?”

“Like Sith!” Ravilan exclaimed. “This is not our way, Seelah. You have—we have become too dependent upon these creatures. They are not Sith.”

“Neither are *we*, by your people’s lights.”

“Don’t get political,” Ravilan said. “Look around, Seelah! Whatever this is should have killed us by now. If it hasn’t, we should take it for what it is. *This is a warning from the dark side.*”

Behind the cloth, Seelah’s jaw dropped. Korsin snapped back to reality. “Wait,” he said, taking Ravilan’s arm. “Let’s talk about this ...”

Korsin and Ravilan began walking toward the gate, which even now was being opened by their attendants. The village itself seemed to exhale, wretched air passing through the opening. Seelah didn’t move, spellbound by the bodies around her. The dead Keshiri looked all the same to her, purple faces and blue tongues, faces twisted in choking agony.

Her footing faltered, and she saw Ravilan’s assistant. What was her name? *Yilanna? Illyana?* Seelah had known the woman’s whole family tree the day before. Why couldn’t she remember her name now, when the woman was on the ground, choked on her tongue, bloated and blue—

Seelah stopped.

She knelt beside the corpse, careful not to touch it. She drew her *shikekar*—the glass blade the Keshiri had fashioned for her—and carefully worked open the woman’s mouth. There it was, the tongue a mad azure, blood vessels engorged and bursting. She’d seen it before in humans, at the edge of her memory ...

“I need to go back,” Seelah said, erupting from the village gates. “I need to go back home—to the ward.”

Korsin, directing his henchmen building a bonfire, looked puzzled. “Seelah, forget about any survivors. *We’re* the survivors. We hope.”

Ravilan, lucklessly trying to calm the collected uvak Korsin had tethered outside the village wall, looked back in alarm. “If you think of bringing this disease into our sanctum—”

“No,” she said. “I’m going alone. If we here are infected, nothing matters anyway.” She took the bridle of an uvak from Ravilan and flashed him an unenthusiastic smile. “But if we’re not infected, it’s like you said. It’s a warning.”

Korsin watched her leave and turned to the task of burning the village. Seelah didn’t look back, soaring into the night. There wasn’t much time. She’d need to meet with her entire staff at the ward, her most loyal aides.

And she’d need to see her son.

When dawn broke over the Takara Mountains, Seelah was not found in the shower by Tilden Kaah—as much as she now felt like she needed one. Seelah hadn't slept at all. With Korsin and Ravilan's return in the dead of night, the retreat had become a crisis center.

Communications were the real problem. The deaths of nameless Keshiri had stirred the Force little for those who didn't care about them anyway. But the aftermath had stirred such confusion in the minds of the Sith that even the most experienced heralds were having trouble fielding messages. Korsin had been careful in calling for the return of his people from the Keshiri towns and villages; so far, Tahv and the rest of the major cities had not heard of the disaster in Tetsubal, and he didn't want a mass withdrawal putting the natives on their guard. Sith abroad were instructed to casually remove themselves from public contact and make their way home.

What had befallen Tetsubal had not yet struck the major cities—but reconnaissance fliers were still out, checking on the surrounding areas. By the time word came in from the hinterlands, all of the Sith would be safely in their redoubt.

Seelah saw Korsin several times in the morning as she passed through. He wanted her staff to set up quarantines for reentry to the compound. None of the Sith who had torched Tetsubal were showing any symptoms of distress, but the stakes were high. Seelah had assignments of her own in the ward, and in fact few of her medical staffers appeared in public. "We're working on the problem," she had told him.

Reentering at noon, Seelah saw Ravilan standing with Korsin, monitoring reports. Korsin seemed haggard from lack of sleep—his little purple fluff wouldn't be dropping by for her walk today! But Ravilan, despite his harrowing experiences of the day before, seemed rejuvenated; his bald head was a robust magenta.

"It goes better than we feared, Korsin," Ravilan said. *No Grand Lord now*, Seelah noticed. *Not even Captain.*

Korsin grunted. "All your people are back?"

"I am informed they have all just arrived back at the stables. Not much of a vacation," Ravilan said, his facial tendrils curling slightly, "but then there is much work to be done. On our new priorities."

Seelah looked up. It should be about now.

"Rider coming!"

The herald sensed the uvak's approach long before it appeared on the southern horizon. Waved directly onto the colonnade, the rider set the beast down and leapt to the stone surface. All eyes were on the new arrival. All save Seelah's.

"Grand Lord," he said, short of breath. "It ... has happened again ... *in Rabolow?*"

Seelah heard Korsin's gasp—but she saw Ravilan's yellow eyes bulge. It took but a second for the quartermaster to find his composure. "Rabolow?"

"That's on the Ragnos Lakes, isn't it?" Seelah looked toward Ravilan and smiled primly. "That's where your people were assigned to go yesterday, wasn't it, Ravilan? Villages on the Ragnos Lakes."

He nodded. They'd all been there when it was being discussed. Ravilan cleared his throat, suddenly dry. "I—I should speak then with my associate who just returned from there." He hobbled past Seelah, turned, and bowed. "I—I really should meet them. Captain."

"You do that," Seelah said. Korsin said nothing, still flabbergasted by the recent news and the coincidence. He watched Ravilan disappear from sight, heading for the stables.

"Rider coming!"

Korsin looked up. Seelah thought he almost looked afraid, afraid of the news the rider would bring.

The news was of another city of death, on another of the Ragnos Lakes. A third rider told of a third. And a fourth. One hundred thousand Keshiri, dead.

Korsin goggled. "Something to do with the lakes? That—what was it—algae that Ravilan was going to study?"

Seelah crossed her arms and looked directly at Korsin, stooped over and nearly her same height. She was tempted to let the moment linger ...

... but there was work to be done. She called for Tilden Kaah.

Her worried assistant appeared from the direction of the ward, holding a small container. She took it and dismissed him. "Do you know what this is, Korsin?"

Korsin turned the empty vial over in his hand. "Cyanogen silicate?"

It was from her medical stores on *Omen*—and also from the stores Ravilan kept for the creatures in his care. In its solid form, she explained, it was used as a cauterizing agent by healers working with the Massassi. She had seen it

used again and again in Ludo Kressh's service. Nothing weaker could do anything to those savages' hides.

"It's bad enough on its own," she said. "But if moisture gets into it, it breaks down—and intensifies a thousand-fold. One particle per billion could do anything."

Korsin's bushy eyebrows flared. "What—what could it do in a water table? *Or an aqueduct?*"

Seelah held his hands firmly and looked directly into his eyes. "*Tetsubal.*"

She explained the story behind the death of her ward's bearer. Beefy Gorem had been seconded to Ravilan's team to help reach what remained in crushed sections of *Omen*. He'd apparently touched a stained deck plate from the Massassi apothecary and died outside, not long after washing his hands. Death was not instantaneous, but the victim never got far.

Ravilan must have seen Gorem's death, she said, and realized he had a tool against the Keshiri. A weapon that could force Korsin and the rest of the humans to forget about building on this world—and recommit to leaving it.

And now every city that members of the Fifty-seven had visited in the previous day had gone the same way as Tetsubal.

Korsin spun and shattered his bridge chair against a marble column. He didn't use the Force. He didn't need to.

"*Why would they do this?*" He grabbed Seelah. "Why would they do this, when it's so obvious I'd trace it back to them? How stupid—how *desperate* would they have to be?"

"Yes," Seelah said, curling around him. "How desperate *would* they have to be?"

Korsin looked into the sun, now beating down on the mountain. Releasing her, he looked into the faces of his other advisers, all waiting and wondering.

"Bring all the others in," he said. "Tell them it's time."

Chapter Four

Seelah had already set her mind on leaving Ludo Kressh before he executed her family. It was trivial; his ankle had been injured in a battle, and she had failed to stop the infection. He'd killed her father the first night, and his leverage lessened considerably after that. Seelah found her chance to go a few days later, when one of Sadow's mining teams stopped on Rbelg to refuel. She didn't have anybody left by then, anyway.

Devore Korsin had been her escape. She saw his immaturity and recklessness, but she also saw something there to work with. He, too, strained against the invisible chains limiting his ambition. He could be her ally. And in Sadow's service, at least, something could happen—as long as Devore didn't foul it up.

And if he did, well, there was always their son ...

Lightsabers flashed in the night on the mountain—but not on the main plaza. Seelah walked calmly along the darkened colonnade, now festooned with added decorations: the tentacled heads of the Fifty-seven, staked at even intervals.

There was the young sentry from the tower, trapped and killed. He'd never abandoned his post. To the right was Hestus, the translator; Seelah

had been involved personally in his takedown. Korsin had said they'd come back to Hestus in the morning to remove the cybernetic implants. Who knew, there might be something they could use there.

She could sense Korsin and his chief lieutenants beyond the outer wall now, driving the remnant to a last stand beside the precipice where *Omen* nearly met its end. No quarter would be offered; she could see Korsin hurling any who surrendered over the side.

Well, he has experience with that.

The stone silo of the stable master loomed before her. Uvak enclosures stretched out in all directions from this central hub, where Keshiri aides would wash the stinking beasts. The Keshiri were gone tonight, she saw as she entered the round room. At the center, watched only by a guard in the shadows, hung the limp but breathing body of Ravilan. Strong cords of Keshiri-woven fiber lashed his splayed arms to cornices high on either side of the structure. The arrangement was designed to keep uvak from bolting during their baths. Now it was doing the same for Ravilan, his feet dangling mere centimeters above the ground. Seelah stepped back as a rush of water poured from slots high in the tower, gagging the prisoner.

The flow stopped after a minute, but it was longer before the weary Ravilan registered the presence of his visitor. "All gone," he choked. "Right?"

"All gone," she said, stepping into his sight. "You are the last." Ravilan had been caught early, his bad leg failing him once and for all.

Ravilan shook his head. "We only did it one time," he said, his throat a gravelly trail. "In Tetsubal. These other cities—I don't know. We never planned—"

"—for *me*," Seelah said.

It had been surprisingly easy, once she'd realized Ravilan's ploy in Tetsubal. The only element was time. She'd returned to the mountain retreat in the night and summoned her most trusted aides from the ward. Soon after midnight, her minions were in the air, propelling their creatures toward the lake towns of the south that Ravilan's people had been instructed to visit the day before. Her ward had held the only other surviving supply of cyanogen silicate; now it was in the wells and aqueducts of the lake cities—and in the bodies of dead Keshiri. Time was the key element—but she'd had help coordinating it all.

"Y-you did this?" Ravilan coughed and managed a weak chuckle. "I guess that's the first time you liked one of my ideas."

"It did the job."

Ravilan's crumpled grin vanished. "What job? *Genocide?*"

"You care about the Keshiri *now?*"

"You know what I mean!" Ravilan strained at his bonds. "My people!"

Seelah rolled her eyes. "Nothing's going on here that wouldn't have happened in the Empire eventually. You know how things were going. Whose movement were you in, anyway?"

"Naga Sadow didn't want this," Ravilan rasped. "Sadow valued power where he saw it. He valued the old and the new. He valued *us*—"

She nodded to the guard—and another crushing barrage of water slammed Ravilan.

It took longer for him to recover this time.

"It could have worked," he choked. "*We* could have worked ... together, like the Sith and the fallen Jedi of old. If only our children—*my* children—had lived ..."

Ravilan looked up, water streaming from his sagging face. "You."

Seelah fixed her silent gaze on the chutes, still dripping, near the ceiling high above.

"*You*," he repeated, louder. "You ran the crèche. You and your people." His face twisted into an agonized scream. The future of his people had already been smothered, long before. "What did you do? *What did you do to us?*"

"Nothing you wouldn't eventually have done to us." She stepped toward the shadows, near the guard. "We are not your Sith. We are something new, a chance to do it right. *A new tribe.*"

"Younglings—infants!" Wilted, Ravilan moaned. "What ... what kind of mother *are* you?"

"The mother of a people," she said, looking toward the guard in the shadows. "Now, my son."

The guard stepped forward—and Ravilan recognized the animal form of Jariad Korsin with the wild-eyed face of his father under jet-black hair. The teenager leapt at the prisoner, wielding a jagged vibroblade without remorse. At the last, he drew his lightsaber and cut Ravilan down in a violent flash of crimson.

"You've changed the world today," Seelah said, stepping close to her son and confederate. He'd been critical to coordinating the previous night's gambit, getting her accomplices where they needed to go. It was right that he should have part of this moment.

The boy panted, looking down at his victim. "He's not who I want to kill."

"Be patient," Seelah said, stroking her son's hair. "*I have been.*"

Tilden Kaah walked quietly along the darkened pathways of Tahv, only recently paved with stones. The Sith had dismissed the other Keshiri attendants earlier in the morning, when the excitement began; he had been one of the last to leave. The streets, usually peopled with merrymakers even at this hour, were alarmingly still. He saw only one middle-aged member of the Neshtovar standing station at a crossing; stripped of his uvak years before, the figure looked bored.

Tilden nodded to the watchman and passed into a plaza near one of the many village aqueducts. Sheets of fresh mountain water tumbled in long crescents from flumes, a cooling presence in what had become a hot night. Arriving before a wall of water, Tilden donned the robe he was carrying, raised the hood, and stepped into the downpour.

Or, rather, through it.

Tilden walked, dripping, down the dark passage leading deep into the stone structure. He followed hushed voices to the end of a passage. There was no light—but there was life. Tilden heard agonized chatter as he approached: the horrible news from the south had begun to arrive. The superstitious Keshiri would probably be expected to absorb the horror quietly, a voice said from the shadows. The Sith would unvariably blame the mass deaths on the Destructors.

"It is done," Tilden spoke to the darkness. "Seelah has rid the Skyborn of the Fifty-seven. Of the people not like them, only the bumpy man, Gloyd, remains."

"Seelah doesn't suspect you?" returned a husky female voice from the blackness. "She doesn't *read your mind?*"

"She doesn't think I'm worth it. And I speak of nothing but the old legends. She thinks me a fool."

"She can't tell our great scholars from our fools," said a male voice.

“None of them can,” said another. “Good. Let’s keep it that way. Seelah has done us a favor, reducing their numbers. She may do more.” A blinding flash appeared as an old Keshiri man lit a lantern. There were several Keshiri there, huddled in the cramped space—their attentions not on Tilden, but on the figure stepping from the shadows behind him. Tilden turned to recognize the woman who had first addressed him.

“Stay strong, Tilden Kaah. With your help—and with the help of all of us here—the Keshiri will finish the job.” Anger glistened in Adari Vaal’s eyes. “I brought this plague upon us. *And I will end it.*”

Savior

Chapter One

4975 BBY

“Children of Kesh, your Protectors have come home to you. *Again!*”

Korsin waited for the clamor from the crowd to die down. It didn't. Captain Yaru Korsin, Grand Lord of the Tribe of Sith on Kesh, stood atop the marbled platform and looked across the churning sea of ecstatic purple faces. Behind him rose the columns and domes of his new home. Once a native village, Tahv was now a Sith capital.

The buildings had been raised quickly on the site of the old Circle Eternal for this day, exactly a quarter century in standard years after the Sith arrival on Kesh. Korsin had been determined to make that anniversary one to celebrate, rather than lament. With today's dedication, Korsin signaled his people's intent to live among the Keshiri for good.

Now, years after the crash, it was clear that nothing more could be done to repair *Omen*. There was no reason to live in their lofty temple at the crash site when such beauty existed below. Korsin cast his gaze upward, toward the cloudy peak on the western horizon. A skeleton team of Sith and Keshiri workers was there, wrapping up affairs on the mountain. Sealed safely in its shrine, *Omen* would be there if they needed it.

Korsin knew they wouldn't. It was a charade. No one was coming for them; he'd known that as soon as he saw the transmitter's melted guts. The planet Kesh was nowhere near anywhere, or Naga Sadow would have found them by now. Them, and his precious Lignan crystals.

He wondered about Captain Saes and the *Harbinger*. Had they survived the collision that had sent *Omen* astray? Had the fallen Jedi won the glory that should have belonged to the Sith, after a victory at Primus Goluud? Or had Naga Sadow slain him for his incompetence?

Does Sadow even live?

Idle thoughts, Korsin knew. But he had to keep these questions alive in his people, so long as any remembered where they came from. Stability demanded it.

It had required an elegant balancing act. Sith facing a future *only* on Kesh would forever fight for status—meaning more days like the one, years before, when he and Devore had dueled. He looked at the Sith standing at attention on either side of the wide slate stairs leading down the platform. So many people, so many ambitions to manage. It was why Korsin had allowed them to think that he had indeed activated the emergency beacon once, before it failed. The prospect of departure had the power to unite; so did the specter of the arrival of a punishing superior power.

But he also had to make sure any hoped-for escape always ran second to their *real* job: reshaping Kesh as a Sith world. What had happened to Ravilan's people was partially due to Korsin's failure at managing that, though he didn't mind the result. Unlike his wife, he had nothing against the crimson-skinned Sith, but factions threatened order. A homogeneous Sith people was easier to rule.

His wife. Marrying Seelah had been another nod to stability, a bridge between *Omen's* crew and its mining-team passengers. There she was, across the dais, greeting the dignitaries the Keshiri were allowed to have. Greeting, that is, without actually *touching* any of them. Korsin never touched her anymore, either. It was a shame: she *was* gorgeous now, auburn hair cascading in ringlets around flawless dusky skin. He didn't know what dark sorceries her team of experts had wrought, but she looked scarcely a day over thirty-five.

This move was her idea. She'd hated the sterility of the mountain retreat; their new home was warmer, both in temperature and in appearance. The Keshiri artisans and Sith designers had learned much from one another.

There was stone, yes, but thorned dalsa flowers scaled the exterior walls. Gardens appeared here and there, beside gurgling aqueduct-fed pools. It was a place for life.

Not all Keshiri cities had been places for life, Korsin thought as he acknowledged the elders hobbling past. He could've lost the natives entirely, years before. The mass deaths at the lake towns had been effectively ascribed to the residents' lack of faith in the Tribe's divinity. The Sith had even made a show for the doubters: a known Keshiri dissenter was trotted onto the Circle Eternal to proclaim against the "so-called Protectors," only to fall, seemingly choking to death on his own words. Korsin himself was able to appear benevolent and shocked—but the message was clear. Plague and pestilence awaited the defiant.

Gloyd had thought up that little stunt. Good old Gloyd. More old, now, than good. The stern Houk stood behind, lightsaber drawn, as Korsin's ceremonial bodyguard—but the onetime gunner now looked like *he* needed the protecting. He was the last nonhuman left from the original crew. An age would pass with him.

"The Daughter of the Skyborn, Adari Vaal," Gloyd announced. Korsin immediately forgot all about architecture and clever Houks. Adari, their native rescuer of old, stepped mildly before them and bowed.

Korsin watched her cold welcome from Seelah. If they weren't in front of half of Kesh, it would be colder still. He always marveled when he watched the two together. There wasn't any comparison. Seelah was attractive, but she knew it—and never let anyone forget it. She found the Keshiri ugly: more proof her judgment was never to be trusted.

As a Keshiri, Adari was so much less than Seelah—and yet so much more. She wasn't touched by the Force, but she had a nimble mind, grappling with things far beyond her people's obvious limitations. And she had the will of a Sith, if not the beliefs. Only twice had he seen her strength fail her—most important, the first time, when she had agreed to keep Devore's death a secret. That had made so many things possible—for both of them.

Stepping before him, Adari regarded Korsin with her dark, probing eyes, full of mystery and intelligence. He took her hand and smiled. *Forget Seelah.*

Twenty-five years. He'd saved his people.

This was a good day.

You can read my mind. Don't you know how uncomfortable this is for me? Don't you care?

Adari pulled her hand free from Korsin's and managed a smile. Seelah's "greeting" had only given her a mild shiver. But Yaru Korsin always looked at her like a cart he was about to buy at half price.

She tried to step back and continue down the receiving line, but Korsin pulled at her arm. "This is your day, too, Adari. Stand with us."

Marvelous, she thought. She tried to avoid Seelah's gaze, unsure if Korsin's body would be enough to block it. But at least that was a discomfort she'd learned to cope with on a daily basis. Public spectacles, like this one, she'd never get used to.

And they had all gone so well for her, whatever her age or status. Right here on this site, she had stood accused as a heretic. And then, days later, she'd stood fêted as a hero—no matter that she had just brought a plague upon her people in the form of the Sith.

Now that the old plaza was buried under this new edifice, she was here again, looking out across a sea of ignorance. The Keshiri blithely celebrated their own enslavement, ignoring their countless brothers and sisters who had died since the Sith arrival. Many had perished in the lake-town disaster—but many more lives had been lost at hard labor, attempting to please their guests from above. The Sith had twisted the Keshiri faith so none of that mattered. Every vain hope the masses ever had was invested in the Sith.

Even Adari wasn't immune. She thought back to her poor son Finn—bloodied and smashed. He'd insisted on joining the work crews on reaching his teen years. No child of the Daughter of the Skyborn needed to work, but Zhari Vaal's youngest had rebelled exactly on schedule, haring off to a work crew.

A scaffold, hurriedly erected, had given way. Adari had failed that day, too, flying her broken child to the temple and Korsin's feet. Korsin had immediately come to Finn's side, working his Sith magic; for a moment, Adari had found herself hoping that Korsin could actually return life to her son. But of course, he couldn't.

She already knew they weren't gods.

Korsin had earned a fight with Seelah that day—healing was *her* domain—but Adari hadn't given a thought to consulting her medics. The Sith doctors had been interested in the Keshiri only long enough to learn that their

diseases posed no threat to humans—and that they could bear the Sith no children. Maybe that was why Seelah tolerated Adari's companionship with Korsin.

But that friendship was never the same after that day. Adari had enjoyed learning from Korsin, but Finn's death had woken her conscience. She'd meant one thing to her people. Thereafter, she'd mean something else—as the leader of the Keshiri underground resistance movement, made up of others who had come to their senses.

And now, after a dozen years, they were finally ready to act.

From the south, a thunderous rumble sounded. The Sessal Spire had been feeling its volcanic youth lately and its volcanic cousins nearer to Tahv were grumbling in replay. Safely remote, it nonetheless disrupted the perfect formation of uvak-fliers hovering over the procession.

Adari looked up at them—and then hard at Korsin, hair now slate gray. She'd learned to hide her thoughts from him by maintaining a steady, emotionless manner. She needed that now, more than ever.

She managed a smile. Korsin had called to her for deliverance, years before. Soon, she would deliver her own kind.

I'm not the bargain you think I am. Neither is Kesh.

Seelah watched as the flight of uvak landed on the clearing below. Theirs had been a sloppy approach; not enough to ruin the day, but enough to call attention where it didn't belong.

It principally did *not* belong on the lead rider, now dismounting and stepping toward the staircase. For her twentieth birthday, Yaru Korsin had made his whelp of a daughter head of something that didn't exist: the Skyborn Rangers. It was little more than a club of Sith hobby riders, useful only for public displays like this. Nida Korsin had just shown it wasn't even much good at that.

That Nida was also *her* daughter was a detail of genealogy. The child's outfit was an abomination against fashion. Seelah imagined the uvak-leather vest and chaps were supposed to make her look rugged and active, but stepping up to the receiving line, little Nida simply looked comical. Seelah recognized her own eyes and cheekbones in the girl, though not much else; short-cropped hair and colored face paints made waste of whatever natural beauty Nida may have inherited. The girl would never have made it through one of Seelah's infamous inspections.

“She’s the child of the Grand Lord,” Seelah rasped to Korsin as their daughter stepped past. “What must the *Keshiri* think?”

“Since when do you care about *that*?”

Nida shuffled off the stage with barely a nod from Korsin. It was time for the real show.

Shrieks came from the crowd—first of surprise, then of joy. From locations within the multitude, two dozen costumed merrymakers in ceremonial Keshiri masks leapt high into the air, tearing their cloaks free as they did. Landing on ground cleared of bystanders by firm Force pushes, the black-clad acrobats stood revealed as the Sabers, the Tribe’s new honor detail. Crimson lightsabers danced as they performed intricate exercises. The final flourish resulted in an explosion of delight from the Keshiri, followed by an announcement from Gloyd: “High Lord Jariad, of the line of Korsin!”

The lead Saber strode robustly up the central staircase to the dais, stealing Keshiri breaths with every resolute step. Ebon hair and beard perfectly coiffed, Jariad made every pause a pose for history. The wild child of Devore Korsin and Seelah had come of age.

Lightsaber still ignited, Jariad stood before Yaru Korsin. Nephew and stepson, Jariad was nearly a third of a meter taller—a fact not lost on anyone watching. An icy look passed between the relatives. Suddenly Jariad knelt, holding the lightsaber centimeters above the back of his own tanned neck. “I live and die at your command, Grand Lord Korsin.”

“Rise, High Lord Korsin.”

Seelah watched with relief as her son rose to a warm embrace. The crowd cooed. For all his title and family connection, Jariad was not Yaru Korsin’s heir to power any more than Seelah was; Korsin had long kept his succession plans private. The seven High Lords he had appointed were mere advisers. But if Jariad was a public favorite, Seelah knew, Sith and Keshiri alike would recognize his claim—one way or another. She was pleased: Jariad had acted just as she had advised. Yaru Korsin’s moment was due, but this was no place for it.

Jariad greeted the others, giving special attention to Adari. The Keshiri woman backed away immediately and looked down. It wasn’t modesty, Seelah knew—though the insufferable bore had much to be modest about. Ever since her son grew into his late father’s looks, Seelah had always caught stray thoughts from Adari whenever Jariad was around. She’d wondered

about it for a long time. Had Korsin bragged to his strumpet about killing Devore? Would that be enough to cause such a strong reaction?

Eventually, Seelah found the answer, deep in her own thoughts. She had riffled through Adari's mind years earlier when they had first met in darkness on the mountain. Then, Seelah had been searching for any hint of rescue. But on contemplation, Seelah had realized that the sea of stones and purple faces in the witless alien's mind included something else. Something half seen, but shocking to Adari—and, at that time, recent: a body, thrown from the precipice into the raging sea.

Adari Vaal had seen Yaru murder Devore Korsin.

And so, at last, had Seelah.

Jariad returned to his mother's side and gave her a knowing glance. "Soon," she whispered.

It required care. Korsin had friends, most from *Omen's* permanent crew. But many Devore Korsin partisans remained. Whispered tales of the captain withholding information about their marooned situation won other allies. She'd see that everyone was in the right place at the right time.

The crowd roared again as Korsin took her hand and turned toward the steps leading up into their new home. Seelah smiled.

Twenty-five years. She'd saved all her hate.

The end was coming.

Chapter Two

Korsin recognized the sound immediately. Lightsabers clashed in the gallery of the capital, right outside the hallway to his office.

Whirling across the glossy floor, Jariad charged at three attackers clad in Saber black. Their blades weren't tracing harmless circuits in the air this time. Jariad's assailants lunged at him, only to be driven back by his angry riposte.

One by one, Jariad bested his opponents—driving one underneath a falling statue, hurling another through a brand-new pane of smoked glass. The third saw his lightsaber skitter down a hallway when Jariad separated his gloved hand from his wrist.

Korsin stepped from the hall, lightsaber—and severed hand—in hand. “Are you sure you want to call this group of yours the Sabers? They seem to be without.”

Jariad deactivated his weapon and exhaled. “This is what I wanted to show you, Grand Lord. They were too quickly disarmed.”

“You shouldn't take that word so literally, son,” Korsin said, tossing the hand to its wincing owner on the floor. “We don't exactly have a modern medlab here.”

"There's no quarter for incompetence!"

"It was an exercise, Jariad, not the Great Schism. Take a breath and come outside." Korsin sighed. Despite his feelings about his late half brother, he had tried to provide guidance for Jariad. It just wasn't taking. Jariad had too many of the same self-absorbed traits that had ruined Devore. Either he did nothing—or he overdid it. *It was a good thing there weren't any narcotics on Kesh*, Korsin thought; *Jariad might have picked up where his father left off.*

Korsin stepped out into the failing sun. The volcanoes had ruined a lot of nice days lately. A Keshiri servant materialized, bearing refreshments.

"Things are no good here," Jariad said, emerging. "There are too many distractions here in this city."

"They are distracting," Korsin said, casting an eye into the courtyard. Adari Vaal had arrived.

Jariad ignored her. "Grand Lord, I request permission to remove the Sabers to the Northern Reaches for a training mission. Way out past Orreg—nothing to distract them in those deserts. There, they can concentrate."

"Hmm?" Korsin looked back at his nephew. "Oh, certainly." He took the second cup from the tray. "Excuse me."

Korsin had thought Adari was looking up at him. Joining her in the garden, he found she was actually staring at a relief sculpture being carved into a triangular pediment on the building above. "What—what is *that*?" she asked.

Korsin squinted. "If I'm not mistaken, that's a depiction of my own birth." He took a drink. "I'm not sure how the sun and the stars are involved." Everywhere he'd looked in this palace, the Keshiri had plastered something depicting his divinity. He chuckled to himself. *We've really done a sales job.* "I wasn't expecting you today."

"We're neighbors now," she said, idly taking the glass.

"With a place this size, we're neighbors with half of Kesh."

"And the other half's inside the house, cleaning the floor—" Adari stopped abruptly and looked him in the eyes. Every so often, she'd flirted with crossing the line. Korsin laughed heartily. She always made him laugh.

But when leathery wings swooped overhead, Korsin saw the real reason for Adari's visit. Tona, her surviving son, rushed from an ornate exterior structure to catch the bridle of a landing uvak. Nida Korsin had returned from her morning ride.

Korsin had named Tona the traveling stable master for Nida's group just after its founding. The young man seemed amiable enough, if not particularly sharp. And Nida seemed fond of him. Adari took her son aside and exchanged quiet words.

Adari turned back to Korsin. "I'm sorry, but I have business in town."

"Will I see you again?"

"What, today?"

"No, I meant, *ever*?" Korsin laughed again. *She's uneasy*, he thought. He wondered why. "Of course, today. We're in the same city now, aren't we?"

Adari rolled her eyes at the colossal building behind them. "That's a lot of effort just to have me around more." She managed a smile.

"Well, just know that I *won't* be here tomorrow," Korsin said. "Seelah's medcenter is moving here from the temple. I'll head up in the morning to inspect the whole place before we close everything down. It's only for a day."

Absorbing his words, Adari touched his hand. "I should be going."

As she stepped away, Korsin looked again at his daughter, across the yard. Nida had paused to watch Jariad and his humbled combatants marching deliberately to their own mounts.

And Tona, he saw, was watching her.

"Your son should be careful, Adari," Korsin said. "He's been spending a lot of time with Nida." He smirked. "It's that Korsin charm that keeps you Vaals around."

"Well, not today, Your Grand Lordship," Adari said, gesturing to her approaching son. "Tona's coming with me. Family business."

"I understand," Korsin said. *Family business*. Watching Jariad fly off to the north, he wished he had less of it himself.

Years before, Izri Dazh had been her tormentor. Inquisitor for the Neshtovar, Dazh had branded Adari Vaal a heretic for not hewing to the legends about Kesh's creation—and the role in it of their gods from above, the Skyborn.

Dazh was long dead. But now his sons and grandsons sat silently across from Adari in Dazh's candlelit drawing room. Adari's resistance movement had met in various places over the years, from beneath an aqueduct to the back of an uvak stable Tona ran in Tahv. But seldom had they met in such luxury—or what had been considered luxury, before Adari brought people

claiming to be the Skyborn into their midst to reshape the Keshiri's standards. Now, in the dwelling that had once temporarily housed Grand Lord Korsin himself, Neshtovar and heretic together decided the fate of the Keshiri people.

"This will work," she said. "What you've taught me about uvak—what we've arranged for your people to do. This will work."

"It had better," rumbled the eldest male. "We're giving up a lot."

"You've *already* given up a lot. This is the only way back."

Adari knew she'd taken a chance by bringing members of the Neshtovar into her circle. But it had to be done, while the older Neshtovar still remembered what had been taken from them by the Sith. The memory of the benefits her old society had unfairly heaped on the uvak-riders had gained their cooperation now.

Adari had recently realized that the uvak were the key. The Sith were powerful; one, acting alone, could keep scores of Keshiri at bay, perhaps even an entire village. But they had to *reach* the village first. And here, Kesh, with its sprawling landmass, worked against them.

The Sith numbered nearly six hundred now, almost double what they had arrived with. But the villages of Kesh were more numerous still. Maintaining order required the Sith to make frequent uvak-flights to the hinterlands. Neshtovar fliers of another era had united the continent of Keshtah by surmounting the many natural barriers. Now the Sith used the same strategy, dispatching circuit riders to make appearances and consult with local bureaucracies, mostly staffed by onetime members of the Neshtovar.

But while they were the Sith's lieutenants on the ground, the Neshtovar were now also *grounded*. Though the Sith had taken the strongest uvak for themselves soon after their arrival, that still left teeming thousands of domesticated beasts to the Keshiri. Most had been employed as animal labor, but the Neshtovar were still allowed to fly uvak on visits to the Sith mountain retreat, among other administrative chores.

That had ended after the disaster at the lakes. Uvak-riders were the Keshiri's traditional news bearers, but the Sith wanted no word spread but theirs. Former riders not reduced to police work were now keeping the stables, nurturing creatures they would never be allowed to ride. Their uvak belonged to Sith probably still in the crèche. Adari had been allowed to keep Nink so that she could continue to visit Korsin, but she was the only one.

“Korsin is going to the mountain temple tomorrow,” she said. “Seelah is there—and Jariad has left for the north.”

The Neshtovar men nodded to one another. “Very good,” the eldest said. “We have adequate numbers in place everywhere, if your head count is right.”

“It is.” Her movement included Keshiri aides to many of the major Sith. Tilden Kaah had been counting heads among Seelah’s retinue; Adari had other people close to Korsin and Jariad. Her son was even keeping track of Nida’s flying performers. “Noon tomorrow. *This will work.*”

Adari thought about Korsin as she stepped into the torchlit alleyway behind the dwelling. Summoned—by Seelah?—Korsin wouldn’t go alone to the temple, no matter how mundane the matter. She double-checked the figures she’d marked on her hand. Yes, she’d have enough people there, just among the stable hands closing up shop.

Tona appeared from the darkness. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Sorry,” Adari said, looking up. “They wanted to go over everything again.”

She could see her son’s flickering disappointment as he stepped into the light. She’d always thought both her children favored their father; now, in his late twenties, Tona surprised her with how much he was looking like her.

“I should have been with you, Mother. I’m of the Neshtovar, too.”

“They’re just being careful, Tona. The fewer people who know the details, the better.”

“I want to ride with you tomorrow,” Tona said.

“You’ve got your own job to do here,” Adari said. “And you’ll see me when you’ve succeeded.” She touched his cheek. “You shouldn’t be away from Nida and her people too long. Tomorrow will be busy. Get some sleep.”

Adari watched as he turned into the night. Sweet, simple Tona. She hadn’t told him everything—but then, how could she? Her late mother had never understood her heresy—or her canonization. How could her son accept her martyrdom?

The golden age had begun, Seelah thought as she surveyed her empty wardroom. And she was responsible.

They’d done good work here in the years she ran the Tribe’s medical staff. All local maladies had been identified and controlled. With Keshiri aid,

Seelah's biologists had scoured the countryside, indexing botanical remedies useful to humans. The Force-healing skills of her staff, far from atrophying, had increased. So had the survival rate of amputees.

The Tribe was a purer people, too—thanks to her attention to eugenics. Before too many generations, the blood of the Sith on Kesh would be fully human. She was sorry she wouldn't live to see it.

Or would she? A pleasant thought.

But the Sith were already more pleasing to *look* at. She'd instilled in the younglings a respect for their bodies, a lust for physical perfection. The Sith Lords they'd left behind were atrocious role models: most of them a barbarian jangle of baubles and war paint. Seelah's Tribe would have none of that. Tattoos were labels for slaves. A Sith of Kesh was already born a work of art.

And after the losses in the purge, the Tribe's numbers had begun to increase rapidly in the last few years. The prospect of a warm home near sea level was enough to stir the most independent-minded Sith with thoughts of family. Out in the courtyard, Seelah saw the Tribe's leading hedonist, Orlenda, enormously pregnant. Wonders never ceased.

"That's everything," Orlenda said, propping herself against a rickety cart of supplies about to leave for Tahv. The younger woman looked down nervously; Korsin was to arrive any minute. "Do ... do you want me here for this? I can't fly, but I can ride down on this cart with the breakables."

Seelah bit her lip. Seeing Orlenda at Seelah's side when he arrived would put Korsin at ease. But if something went wrong here, Orlenda could make sure Seelah's policies lived on. "Go," she said, sighing. "But hurry. They're arriving."

Orlenda rattled off behind Keshiri bearers. Besides uvak, they were the continent's only beasts of burden.

It was time. Seelah hurried toward the plaza formed by the domiciles and *Omen's* shrine. Korsin's entourage landed at the far end. Right on schedule, for a change. Korsin and Gloyd's four bodyguards took their positions as Keshiri attendants walked the uvak away. Their stables would be the very last thing to close.

Korsin studied the plaza around him.

"Ah, Seelah. There you are." He stepped toward her. Out in the open.

"Yes. There you are." She closed her eyes and concentrated. *Now, Jariad!*

Chapter Three

It wasn't the rush of bodies that startled Korsin so much as where they came from. Black-clad Sith descended upon the plaza from the living quarters—doorways, upper windows, rooftops—and from the ramparts of *Omen's* multilevel temple. Korsin ignited his lightsaber and stood his ground as the invaders approached. They were Jariad's Sabers, the same team from the previous morning.

Korsin exchanged glances with Gloyd. Their bodyguards flanked them, forming a defensive huddle facing outward. *Four to one.* "Stick together."

Korsin watched as Jariad strode purposefully from the temple doorway, weapon lit. "This doesn't look like the Northern Reaches to me, Jariad."

His nephew said nothing. He had that wild look again. *Devore's look.*

"I agreed to your little group to give you something to do," Korsin yelled. He addressed Jariad's stern companions. "You should be ashamed. Get back to Tahv."

"I'm not like Nida," Jariad said, still approaching. "I don't need hobbies. Enough time has been wasted." He walked around his confederates, now forming a perimeter of glowing lightsabers around Korsin's group. "It's time

to make your reckoning, *Captain* Korsin. You told us yourself. A new age has dawned. It's time for military authority to end. This is about succession—about who should best lead the Tribe.”

“Who? *You?*” Korsin tried to act surprised—and chuckled. “Oh, Jariad—I really don't think so. Go home.”

Jariad froze, evidently aware of the watchful stares from his own forces. Gloyd, seeming to catch the idea, guffawed. “Captain, I wouldn't put this one in charge of mucking out the uvak stalls.”

“I'm the future!” Jariad boomed. “I'm the youngest of those born on high. All Sith after me are Kesh-born.” He raised his lightsaber. “The leader of the Sith should be special.”

Korsin glared—and growled. “You're not special. I've seen your like before.”

A woman's voice rang out. “*Tell him about it!*” Seelah. He'd forgotten about her. She stood at the end of the plaza, now joined by several of her loyal retainers. All armed. “Tell him about how you saw his father *die*, Yaru. Tell him how you killed him and threw his body onto the rocks, all to keep control of us!”

Korsin started to respond, only to see Jariad step backward. The Sabers closed in. Clearly, Jariad was going to let them take the first blows before entering for the kill. Korsin steeled himself—and looked to the clouds. *Noon*.

Suddenly shadowy figures sailed across the quad. Five, ten—dozens of creatures took to the skies, lifting from behind the temple. Uvak.

Theirs.

“What in blazes?” Jariad looked to his mother. Seelah appeared to have no more idea than he did.

An answer finally came from one of her aides, rushing breathlessly up the staircase to the plaza. “The stable-hands—the Keshiri! *They're stealing our uvak!*”

Several of Jariad's Sabers looked up, stunned. Korsin saw his chance. He and Gloyd launched toward the black-suits on their side, sweeping a deadly path toward the nearest building. Their bodyguards closed in behind them, blocking pursuit as best they could.

Korsin and Gloyd dashed through the building, followed by a mob of Sabers. Korsin made for the staircase, beckoning for Gloyd to follow.

“Nice trick, Captain,” Gloyd said. “But we could've used more than that!”

“It's not my trick,” Korsin said, reaching a window. “And you're right!”

He looked urgently toward the skies and probed the Force in vain. He had been delivered from the mountain years before. But he could sense that his deliverer now was far away.

Her riding had improved since her first desperate flight, years before. Now Adari ably guided Nink as he soared, following the jagged coastline below. Behind her flew more than a hundred uvak—the entire population of the stables at the mountain temple, ridden by Keshiri stable hands, domestics, and laborers. All agents of Adari’s movement, all carefully positioned there for this day. If any mounts had been left to the Sith in the temple, no one was using them to follow.

The flock approaching far from the east was one of hers. There’d be others. In villages across the continent, the same thing would be happening: Neshtovar conspirators merely tending their uvak would, instead, take to the air with them, leaving none behind.

There wouldn’t be riders enough, but that didn’t matter. While not natural herd animals, even unbroken uvak were strongly suggestible to the booming bleats of elder males—the exact sort the Neshtovar tended. Stories had been passed down of aerial roundups over the centuries, with riders leading clouds of the reptiles through the sky. Adari’s would be a rolling storm front, sweeping up all the animals in the countryside in vast, successive waves. They’d crafted their routes to funnel every uvak that wasn’t tied down toward the Sessal Spire, looming ahead in its smoldering majesty.

Here, safely away from the crater, the lead riders would set their beasts down just long enough to dismount. Remaining aloft, Adari would order Nink to give a nesting cry: a powerful command compelling all uvak within earshot to immediately follow. At forty, pampered Nink was the oldest uvak in memory. All uvak would blindly heed his command—briefly. But long enough, Adari figured, for her to soar into the clouds high above the smoking crater—and disappear.

It wouldn’t be suicide. It would be deliverance.

The Sith had traveled far on uvak-back, but the Neshtovar were the recipients of generations of knowledge of the air currents of Kesh. They knew the odd things the jet stream did when the Sessal Spire acted up. Riders flying high enough simply vanished, hurtling beyond the morning horizon, far over the great eastern sea. She would climb high—and the wind would claim her and any uvak that followed.

Despite her initial dislike of uvak, she winced at the thought of what would follow. The frantic flock would struggle against the vortex, but at such an elevation, Kesh was in command. Perhaps a similar phenomenon had disabled the Sith vessel; Adari didn't know. But by the time the winds weakened, she—and every uvak she could convince to follow—would be headed for a watery end. *Just like my husband*, she mused.

Her co-conspirators loved their uvak, but they hated the Sith more. They had often discussed what would happen next. The Sith leaders would descend from the mountain retreat on their service path, but it would take time—time during which Adari's allies would strike at the major Sith sympathizers in each village. There would be no open resistance. It would be shikkar blades in the night. The Sith might be proud.

In truth, of course, the Sith would lash out. Tahv would surely feel their wrath. But the Sith would be running their pogrom on foot. Their transportation would be gone from the map—literally. And the Keshiri would find it easier to kill the remaining stray uvak than Sith.

The Sith now had young of their own to protect; they might simply stake out a chunk of territory for themselves and leave it at that. Or, better still, they might retire to their mountain refuge for good. Most Keshiri still idolized their Protectors—but as long as some of them were willing to poison their masters, they would forever be a danger.

Presuming poison killed the Sith at all. Adari had never really shared her confederates' enthusiasm about the aftermath. She knew what the Sith were capable of. It might take a thousand Keshiri to kill a single one. But even if it did? Right now, the odds still favored the Keshiri. They wouldn't later on. *Which is why this has to be today*, she thought.

Kesh teemed with life. That one of its species would pay a price for its usefulness was tragic. But the Keshiri had already paid a price for their own usefulness to the Sith. Both had to end.

Her group merging with the fliers from the east, Adari whipped Nink around and looked in the direction of Tahv. That would be the big wave.

When it arrived.

Where *were* they?

Seelah dashed across the rooftop of her old home. For half her life, she'd awakened to the same view of the sea that had swallowed Devore. Now,

looking down, she saw her forces closing in on the man who'd sent him there.

She hadn't seen how, but Korsin and Gloyd had gotten separated. The lumbering Houk was still alive, she knew—her loyal aides had chased him into another part of the complex. But Korsin was the key. He'd chosen his bodyguards well. Two remained alive, injured but effective in their misguided defense.

Jariad's team of Sabers, meanwhile, had proven lacking in formal training. He'd insisted on being their only mentor, but had only begun serious combat training in recent weeks, after Seelah made the decision to strike. Jariad reminded her more of his father every day. There was no corner Devore Korsin would not cut.

The uvak disappearance was an unexpected problem, but it cut equally, removing escape for all. The Keshiri had cleared all the animals out. Had Jariad made that preparation without telling her? Unlikely. But it seemed to have affected Korsin's hopes. There, down on the reinforced slope beside *Omen's* temple, he continued to look up. Seelah was certain he wasn't looking at her.

Seelah relished the view. Jariad had Korsin now. Trained or not, his Sabers had the numbers. As his bodyguards lagged, Korsin backed toward the precipice, the same mark from which Devore had fallen. Jariad would like that. He seemed to be relishing every moment—slashing again and again at Korsin, his blade occasionally finding its mark. Korsin was hurt now—bleeding badly. Jariad pushed ever closer, driving his uncle backward.

And yet, Korsin kept looking up.

What was he expecting?

A crash from behind drew her attention. The limp form of one of her aides rocketed through a skylight and disappeared over the side. *So that's where Gloyd is.* He had to be contained, away from the action below. Angered at being robbed of seeing Korsin die, Seelah turned to the shattered skylight—

—only to lose her footing as beating wings soared across the crest of the rooftop. Seelah rolled sideways, avoiding the kicking, clawed feet. The uvak were back!

Tumbling through the gaping hole, Seelah hit the stone floor on all fours. Gloyd's battle was in the next room, but she scrambled for the window

anyway. She had to see. Had the Keshiri returned with the uvak? Or was it someone she had never considered, never counted on?

Looking out, she saw.

Nida.

Chapter Four

Korsin had played his trump.

Nida's very existence, he knew, was part of Seelah's game to keep herself and Jariad close to the seat of power. Giving Korsin a daughter was of use to Seelah; Nida herself, wasn't. Seelah had "caringly" found a series of Keshiri nursemaids and then tutors for the child, boarding her in one village after another. Officially, it was a gesture of Sith trust in the Keshiri; in truth, it reflected the hole he'd always known was in his wife's heart.

There was more. Seelah wasn't just getting Nida out of the way; Korsin knew she was preventing her daughter from receiving anything more than superficial training in Sith ways. Seelah kept the rolls of Sith on Kesh; she knew where all potential mentors were at any time.

But Korsin had several loyal crew members willing to serve him in any role. With Gloyd's help, Korsin had staged their deaths in remote areas of Kesh and sent them into hiding. All during the nights of Nida's seeming exile, the girl had secretly been learning the ways of the dark side—even as, during the days, she was winning Keshiri friends and building a network of

informants. All in her seemingly meaningless—but very mobile—role as aerial ambassador for the Sith.

While Seelah was striving to portray herself as the model Sith on Kesh, Korsin was crafting a leader, someone with the talents to fight *and* to govern. An heir—and today, a savior.

The night before, one of Nida's Keshiri acquaintances had revealed the plot to steal the uvak while the principal Sith were atop the mountain. She'd spent the morning making sure whatever the Keshiri were doing went no further, before joining Korsin here—along with her Skyborn Rangers and several Korsin partisans. Not many, and not as soon as he'd hoped—but enough, and in time. He'd flushed out his enemies by coming here; their surprise was complete.

Nida leapt to the ground, lightsaber glowing, impaling one of Jariad's thugs as she landed. Two converged upon her position, only to be cut in half. She threw a third into the temple wall, just behind. There wasn't much fighting ground by the cliffside, but Nida was already dominating it. Jariad himself had backed away from Korsin before the kill, joining his Sabers in their fight.

A muffled explosion came from the mansion farther up the hill. *Gloyd*, Korsin knew. Gritting his teeth, the captain dabbed at the gash on his chest. He wasn't coming back from this, he knew. The ground faltered beneath him. There wasn't much left.

But he looked up again at Nida.

So strong. His future for the Sith, battling Seelah's future. And winning.

Wincing in pain, Korsin crawled back from the precipice toward the fray. Jariad, injured and struggling to stall his sibling's advance, looked back in surprise.

"You're right, Jariad," Korsin said, choking back blood. "It's time for me to go—but not without my last official act. *And it's overdue.*"

Adari should have been more surprised. By nightfall, more than a thousand Keshiri had arrived near the foot of the Spire, leading five times that many riderless uvak. The mob of beasts circling high above the smoking formation had given the appearance of a living, leathery halo. It was stirring, but disappointing: this many would barely have filled the uvak pens in the southern foothills.

Adari had given up scanning the horizon long before her compatriots did. At midnight, a lone rider from Tahv had arrived, breathless and terrified. His report confirmed her suspicion. Tona had fallen under Nida Korsin's spell and revealed all their plans.

It had been hopeless from the beginning; someone would have betrayed them. Tona was just the weakest. Adari had turned away before she heard whether Nida had rewarded Tona, or killed him. Nothing mattered anymore.

What *had* surprised Adari was what had happened next. She'd expected everyone to leave. To fly away, free their uvak, and melt back into Keshiri society before the Sith found them. Instead, when she'd somberly taken to the clouds on Nink and headed for the dark river of air, she'd found the entire entourage in her wake.

She'd fallen asleep, assuming Nink would surrender to gravity in the night. So many others had already fallen away into the ocean since they'd left Keshtah behind. Her turn would come.

But she awoke to something else.

From above, the spit of land was no more than a seam between the waves, a chain of reefs adjoining a mucky surface barely larger than her old neighborhood. Nothing about it suggested a haven. But the jet stream had given out—and so had Nink. Of the riders who had begun, fewer than three hundred remained. It was this, or nothing.

And this is close to nothing, she thought as she padded across the salty grime of the beach. The mainland had provided everything the Keshiri needed to thrive. Here, bare necessities would have to be clawed for. Infrequent rains pooled fresh water on concave reefs. The uvak, useless with no destination in sight, would have to be culled dramatically to give the scant vegetation a chance. Their flesh was barely edible; their carcasses yielded the only building materials.

To her intellectual pursuits, the island offered nothing at all. Just the same volcanic rubble from beach to hillcrest. Years in a purgatory of her own making weren't enough, it seemed: now she must be bored to death. All she'd found was an ancient Keshiri corpse—another lonely victim of the oceanic air currents.

Why couldn't the Sith have landed here?

She knew the answer. The Sith *had* been trapped in such a place. To save herself—from them, and from the elders—she had set them loose. Korsin had been right, those years ago. *We all do what we have to do.*

They were doing it now. Adari looked at Nink, dying of exhaustion, forked feet barely responding to the caresses of the surf. She couldn't simply bury him when the time came; he'd be needed, just like the rest. The uvak were integral to their survival—but disposable when necessary.

The Sith had looked upon the Keshiri in exactly the same way.

Adari studied her people, toiling mutely on the island. They expected they wouldn't survive the year. Worse, anyone who came looking for them would not be a savior.

Perhaps Korsin's Sith worried about the same thing, she thought. Perhaps the tales were true. Perhaps the real Skyborn, the *true* Protectors of legend, were out there somewhere, hunting for the Sith.

She didn't believe it.

But then, she never had.

Seelah awoke on a slab in her old sick ward. There wasn't any difference between the patient accommodations and the biers in the morgue; it was all cold marble, just as everything in the accursed temple was.

Seelah was moving now—only her legs weren't. She remembered it all. Seconds after she saw Nida arrive, Gloyd had brought the fight into Seelah's chamber. Gloyd had always bragged that whoever took him out wouldn't live to celebrate. Indeed, cornered by Seelah and her confederates, Gloyd had activated something he must have had literally up his sleeve since the crash: a proton detonator. The Houk's insurance policy had brought the room down on the entire party.

The Force had helped free Seelah from the rubble that pinned her from the knees down, but nothing could make her walk again. She didn't need her medical training to recognize that. She'd worked tirelessly to become a perfect specimen of humanity, something for the Tribe to aspire to. Now, sitting up and surveying her cuts and bruises, she knew she would never live up to her old example again.

"You're awake." came a soft female voice. "Good."

Seelah craned her neck to see her daughter in the doorway, wearing her outfit from Dedication Day. When Nida didn't move to enter, Seelah used her aching arms to turn herself.

"You're going to be doing a lot of that," Nida said, stepping inside and dipping a cup into a basin. She drank deeply and exhaled. "Oh, when you need it, the water's over here." She looked away.

Nida explained how she had learned from Tona Vaal of the plan to steal the Sith's uvak, timed just when as many important Sith as possible would be on the mountain. It had taken her more time than she expected, but she had foiled the plot in Tahv and hurried to her father's side. But she'd arrived too late. "I guess you can feel it—Father's gone."

Seelah licked her lips, tasting her own dried blood. "Yes. And Jariad?"

"Father tried to throw him over the side with the Force," Nida said. "He tried ... and when he failed, *I* did it."

Seelah looked blankly at her daughter.

"I hated to use poor Tona like that," Nida said, "but he thought he had something I wanted." She took another sip. "We had something in common, you know. Our mothers had no use for our fathers."

Tona had revealed that the conspirators were taking the uvak to the Sessal Spire, but he knew nothing beyond that. "There's no sign of them there," Nida said. "Our guess is they plunged themselves into the lava pit. In spite—or fear. It doesn't matter." Sith or Keshiri, dissent was finished on Kesh. It had been a productive day.

"I came here because we just had the reading of Father's final testament," she said. It existed—in her care. "He commends his legacy to me—and the three surviving High Lords have ratified it. So you see? You *are* the mother of the new Grand Lord. Congratulations." Nida beamed. At her age, she could expect to rule Kesh for decades to come. "Or until the Sith come to rescue us."

Seelah sneered. "You *are* a child." She slid from the slab, only to brace herself against it with her hands when her feet failed to respond. "No one's coming for us. Your father knew that."

"He told me. It doesn't really matter to me, one way or the other."

"It should," Seelah said, struggling to straighten. "If I tell those people out there ..."

Nida casually replaced the cup and stepped back toward the doorway. "There's no one out there," she said. "Perhaps you should hear the rest of Father's final wishes. Henceforth, on the death of the Grand Lord, that person's spouse and household laborers would be sacrificed. He got the idea from an old Keshiri custom. Technically, it's to honor the Grand Lord—

but you and I know what it's really about." She ran her gloved fingers through her hair. "I imagine it's going to put a crimp in my social life, but I'll cope."

Seelah caught her breath. "You can't mean to ...?"

"Relax," Nida said. "*Henceforth*. No, I've ordered that all Sith remove themselves from this mountain, in honor of Father's passing. While I live, none may return here. This is your new home—again." And with that, she stepped out into the courtyard.

It took Seelah painful minutes to follow, dragging herself across the stonework. Nida was stepping onto the stirrup of her uvak, surrounded by hejarbo-shoot crates of fruits and vegetables. More would be dropped by regular uvak overflights, Nida said; the only creatures, wild or trained, to be allowed in the airspace above the temple. Elsewhere in the compound, access to *Omen's* shelter had been cut off. Below, the path up the mountain was being barricaded, even now. It had been painstakingly carved, but it would now be blocked forever.

What remained, Seelah saw as she looked around, was the cold temple she had come to despise living in. A home fit only for a goddess on high—forever. Alone.

"Nida," Seelah coughed as Nida began to take flight. "Nida, *you're my child*."

"Yes, that's what they tell me. Good-bye."

Purgatory

Chapter One

3960 BBY

Their afternoon began as it always had. The rake fell, gouging orderly grooves into the black mud. Lifting it for another pass, the wielder brought it down again, neatly bisecting the furrows.

Ori Kitai watched from across the hedge. The young farmer went so slowly. The rake, an insubstantial marriage of hejarbo shoots and flinty rocks, nonetheless parted the rich soil with ease. But Jelph of Marisota seemed to be in no hurry—at this, or anything else.

How monotonous it must be, Ori thought. All day, every day, the man in the straw-brimmed hat tended his duties, with no place to go or friends to see. His homestead sat alone at a bend of the Marisota River, far from most centers of Sith culture on Kesh. Nothing existed upstream but volcanoes and jungle; nothing downriver but the ghost towns of the Ragnos Lakes. It was no life for a human.

“Lady Orielle,” Jelph said, doffing the hat. Sandy hair hung in a long braid outside the collar of his soaked blouse.

“Just Ori,” she said. “I’ve told you a dozen times.”

"And that means a dozen visits," he said in that strange accent of his. "I'm honored."

The slender, auburn-haired woman strolled along the hedge, casting sidelong glances at the workman. She didn't have any reason to hide why she still came here—not with her family's future about to be assured. Ori could do what she wanted. And yet, as she stepped through the opening onto the gravel path, she felt meek and fifteen again. Not a Sith Saber of the Tribe, a decade older.

Her brown eyes trained on the ground, she chuckled to herself. There was no reason for modesty. Ori wore the black uniform of her office. Jelph wore rags. She'd passed the tests of apprenticeship on the grounds of the palace, along the glorious promenade walked by Grand Lord Korsin more than a millennium earlier. Jelph's home was a hovel, his holding less a farm than a depot for the fertilized soils he provided the gardeners of the cities.

And yet the man had something she'd never encountered in another human: He had nothing to prove. No one ever looked directly at her in Tahv. Not really. People always had one eye on what the conversation could mean for them, on how her mother could help them. Jelph had no thoughts of advancement.

What good would such thoughts be to a slave?

Setting down the rake, Jelph stepped from the mud and pulled a towel from his belt. "I know why you're here," he said, wiping his hands, "but not why you're here *today*. What's the big occasion this time?"

"Donellan's Day."

Jelph looked blankly at her. "That one of your Sith holidays?"

Ori tilted her head as she followed him around the hut. "You were Sith once, too, you know."

"That's what they tell me," he said, pitching the towel away. It landed in a bucket on the ground, out of his sight. "I'm afraid we don't cultivate much ancestral memory out in the hinterlands."

Ori smiled. He was so learned, for a lesser. Jelph cultivated plenty, out of sight of the trail where she'd left her uvak to graze until she was ready to fly again. Behind the house, past the small mountains of river clay he traded with the Keshiri, he kept six trellises of the most beautiful dalsa flowers she'd ever seen. Like the hut and rake, the trellises were made from lashed-together hejarbo shoots—and yet they made for a display that rivaled the

horticultural wonders of the High Seat. Here, behind a slave's quarters in the middle of nowhere.

Taking the crystal blade she offered, the hazel-eyed farmer started cutting the specimens she selected. As usual, they'd decorate the urns on her mother's balcony at the revels.

"So your event. What is it?" Pausing, he looked down at her. "If you want to tell me, that is."

"Nida Korsin's firstborn was born a thousand years ago tomorrow."

"Oh," Jelph said, trimming. "Did he become Grand Lord or something?"

She smirked. "Oh, no." The reign of Nida Korsin had initiated a robust, glorious age for the Sith, she explained. Donellan knew that his father, the Lord Consort, would be put to death on Nida's passing. That was in Yaru Korsin's will. But he'd waited too long to make his move. Nida's only son had died an old man, waiting for his chance to rise to power. It was the end of a dynastic system; following his passing, heirless Nida had instituted succession based on merit.

"So this guy failed, and he has his own day?"

The Sith liked the message of Donellan's story, she told him. Many Sith were patient about engineering their ascensions, but it was possible to be too patient. "Donellan's Day is also called the Day of the Dispossessed. And think about it," she said, admiring his muscled arms through the slit sleeves. "Has the Tribe ever really *needed* a cause for a celebration?"

He laughed once, a throaty chuckle that made Ori smile. "No, I guess not," he said. "At least it keeps people in my line of work busy."

The seven High Lords were always trying to outdo one another in decorating their boxes at the games. Taking the design of her mother's booth into her own hands eight months earlier, Ori had learned about Jelph and his secret garden from one of the Keshiri florists of Tahv—if indirectly. Sensing a lie when the Keshiri claimed that the flowers were his own, Ori followed him on her uvak one day. The flying beasts still forbidden to the Keshiri, the florist had traveled on foot to meet a caravan of carts bringing fertilizer from the Marisota. She found Jelph—and had found him again many times since, except when he was away on his raft, up in the jungle.

The jungle. Ori looked over the trellis to the green hills, climbing away to the smoldering peaks of the east. Even the Tribe didn't go up into that tangle of underbrush and overhanging foliage. "No sane person *should* go there," Jelph had said. But what he brought back on his little barge was the secret

to his horticultural success—and the successes of all his customers along the line. “By the time the runoff comes downstream,” he’d explained once, digging his hands into a mound of soil, “a lot of the nutrients are gone.” Ori had lain awake nights imagining the man waist-deep in a dark mountain stream, shoveling muck into his flatboat.

Silliness. A hedonistic excess. But she was Sith, wasn’t she? Who else should she please?

Kneeling, he arranged the cuttings neatly upon a cloth draped across the ground. Large, dirt-stained hands worked with surprising gentleness, prying away the buds that had come to nothing. Jelph looked at her keenly. “You know, I can give you the names of my customers closer to Tahv. They’re growing their plants in the same dirt.”

“Yours are better,” she said. That much was true. Perhaps the flowers simply grew better in air closer to their native soil. Maybe it was the workmanship of a human, rather than a Keshiri.

Or maybe it was *this* human. When she’d met him, she’d imagined Jelph had only recently become a slave. No laborer she’d met, human or Keshiri, had his vocabulary. He must have *been* someone before, back in the Sith cities. But he’d answered without hesitation: “I’m nobody. I never *knew* anybody, before you.” He’d been born into slavery, and there he’d stay. He, and whatever children he might ever have.

The human slave class had developed soon after the Korsin line ended. While many of *Omen*’s descendants were Force-sensitive, those who weren’t had formed their own layer of society beneath those who served the Grand Lord. Free members of the Tribe, this yeomanry helped to keep the Keshiri, who stood at the very bottom, productive. But when any Sith citizen stood condemned by a Lord, birthright could be lost forever. Jelph of Marisota had no surname because his father had none to give. He was better than a Keshiri—she’d *never* let one of the purple-skinned serfs call her by her first name—but only because he was human, not because he was Sith. Jelph owed fealty and service to the Sith, should they want it, but only Ori had ever prevailed upon him directly for anything.

Such a waste, she thought, admiring both worker and workmanship. “You know, my mother’s a High Lord.”

“You’ve mentioned it.”

“She’s powerful, but the traditions are so strong,” she said. “It’s a shame there isn’t some kind of path for you to get back in.”

"I never *was* in," he said. "And what would I do in Tahv? I'd hardly fit with your beautiful people." Looking up at her, he winked. In the sunlight, she could see the long, ruddy scar running from his right cheek down his neck. She'd sometimes imagined it as being from some great battle, rather than some farm accident, years ago. But he was right. Even if he had his name, his disfigurement would make him an ill fit for the Tribe.

Jelph stood abruptly.

"You *are* going to roll those up," she said, eyes darting between him and the flowers.

"Actually, I have something for you," he said, pointing a thumb behind him. "In honor of your Day of Dispossession."

"That's 'Dispossessed.'"

"Begging your pardon." He led her farther into the farm than she'd been before, past the mounds to a structure she'd seen only from the sky. Situated near the riverbank, the hut was larger than his dwelling and twice the height.

Ori blanched. "What's back there? It stinks!"

"Manure usually does. Uvak are pretty rank," he said, approaching the barred door. Once a stable for a previous occupant who could own uvak, now it provided him a wind-free place to store the loads of dung he needed for mixing his soil. "You don't want to be around when I have that stuff carted in." He opened the door.

"Surely *this* isn't your gift to me," she said, squinting and covering her nose.

"Surely not." He reached inside the doorway to retrieve a strange-looking yoke. "It's something I was working on. I lengthened some waterskins and attached them to part of an uvak harness." Balancing the center straps on his hands, he showed her how the long pouches hung to either side. "You've always had to fly the dalsas back in a moist cloth. With these, you can carry them straight—and you won't be soaked when you get home."

Ori opened her eyes wide, even as he shut the door to the rancid place. "You made that for me?"

Jelph looked around. "Hmm. I don't see the Grand Lord here today, so ... sure. I guess it's for you."

They walked back along the riverside, past the little gornk-shell flatboat tied at the bank. Returning from its grazing, Shyn, Ori's uvak, flew in from above and settled in a clearing. Jelph strode assuredly toward the animal and

lifted the yoke over its leathery frame. A perfect fit. Shyn, who took to no one, nodded passively.

This is why I come here, Ori thought. Life at court was cutthroat—this month, more than most times. But so many were motivated not by lust for power, but by fear of losing what power they had. This man had nothing and feared nothing.

Her mother had given it a name: the Confidence of the Dead End.

Jelph partially filled the skins with water and then deposited the clippings inside. Shyn looked like a parade animal now, festooned with flowers. That might be an idea for sometime, Ori thought—but not for tomorrow. She watched as he fastened the tops to protect the blossoms.

“There. Fit for the Grand Lord.” He helped her aboard the uvak.

“Jelph,” she said, looking down. “With what you can do, you really ought to be teaching the Keshiri how to grow things. Not selling them dirt.”

“Careful,” he said, gesturing toward the composting barn. “My life’s in that dirt.” He patted Shyn’s long face and turned toward his flatboat, bobbing in the water. “And I may not be of the Tribe, but at least *I’ve* got a ship.” He laughed. “Such as it is!”

Chapter Two

The Sith *did* have a ship, Ori knew, but she'd never seen it. No one alive had. One of Yaru Korsin's last acts was to remove everyone from the lofty retreat to Tahv, where the newcomers could expand their numbers and reach. Aerial sentries perpetually protected the holy and forbidden Temple from violators, Sith and otherwise. But the mountain was always visible over Tahv's now-useless protective walls, a reminder of their stellar origins.

Ori could see the peak clearly from her mother's new luxury compartment in the Korsinata. Multiple stadium decks rose over a pentagonal playing field, with the Grand Lord's section highest of all. Just that morning, Ori's mother had been awarded a coveted section in the stadium near the Grand Lord, whose balcony always faced the Temple.

"Closer to the stars," Ori said under her breath. *We're moving up.*

She studied the horizon. There, kilometers away, *Omen* sat in its protective building, waiting for the day when the Sith came for their lost tribe. But no one had come, and few explanations for why were attractive. The legendary Sith Lord Naga Sadow would have found them by now, had he won his war. If the Sith and Jedi had wiped each other out, no one might ever come.

And what if the Jedi had won? As she had on the farm, Ori blanched just to think of it. She knew what Jedi were only from her teachers, who'd kept the story alive. Ori knew enough to hate the Jedi and everything they stood for. Weakness. Pity. Self-denial. Discovery by Jedi would be a cruel fate, indeed.

But the worst thing about the passage of time had been the realization that, in their attempts to get off-world, those same pioneers of legend from a millennium earlier had squandered most of the resources that could have helped the Tribe now. Plenty of Lignan crystals from *Omen's* hold circulated, but they were good for lightsabers and little else. And any understanding of how *Omen* worked had faded; it was now the province of scholars who no longer had access to the vessel. Only the Grand Lord could reverse Korsin's ban and return the Tribe's eyes to space.

It wouldn't be *this* Grand Lord, the biggest nothing ever to hold the position. Ori seethed as she looked across to the withered crone in her ornately decorated stall. Lillia Venn rocked in her throne, her palsied hand moving completely out of time with the tempo of the musicians playing below. Grand Lord Venn had been a compromise candidate a year earlier, when the other six High Lords had been unable to agree on a new leader. The oldest High Lord by twenty years, Venn was past fearing; no one had imagined she would last. The rival political parties, distinguished by the red and gold sashes they wore, swore fealty to the woman while continuing to plot their next steps. This Grand Lord was a corpse-in-waiting.

"Don't forget to salute, darling."

Ori looked back into the dark eyes of Candra Kitai. Vibrant for her fifty years, the newest High Lord approached the railing, turned primly toward the royal booth, and bowed. When the Grand Lord did not respond, Candra's face drew so tight Ori feared it might crack wide open.

"Easy, Mom," Ori said. "Like you told me, it's our big day." Months earlier, Ori's mother had taken Venn's place among the seven High Lords, instantly becoming the second most important person in the Tribe. By keeping her preferences regarding the rival factions private, Candra had become the tiebreaker: the one ultimately to select the aged leader's successor.

Recognizing Candra's new importance, Venn had given her the section nearby, in range of even her feeble eyes. If treated well, Candra could keep the other High Lords stalemated indefinitely, fending off all challenges.

And then? *Who knows*, Ori thought. *By next Donellan's Day, we might be in the royal box.*

Her own rivals among the Saber leadership, the Luzo brothers, flanked the Grand Lord. The barrel-chested pair glared back at Ori, barely concealing their disdain. Probably annoyed, she thought, because this was the one moment when they wouldn't be able to sabotage her. They'd been watching her for months, eager to profit from any slip. With any luck, the end of Venn would be the end of the Luzos, too.

"Easy, dear," Candra prompted, catching her thought. "We're all friends today." The newest High Lord turned and nodded to the leaders of the two rival factions, seated in their customary red and gold boxes. High Lords Dernas and Pallima were as important to her as the Grand Lord was—and she, to them.

"Friends. Right." Ori rolled her eyes.

"But our booth looks lovely. A fine job, again."

Reminded, Ori turned her gaze to something more pleasing—the dalsa flowers, fresh and vibrant on the balcony. Jelph of Marisota might never appear here, but at least some part of him had made the trip.

Thunder came from below. Ori looked down to see the riders, wearing the ancient garb of Nida Korsin's Skyborn Rangers, entering the field with their crippled uvak. Harshes of all bloodsports on Kesh, rake-riding even began with gore. The wing muscles of uvak hatchlings were cut, permanently grounding them while preserving some range of movement. With glass prongs screwed into their tough wing edges, the fully grown creatures stalked around, their flopping wings transformed into dangerous weapons.

Squinting, Ori tried to identify the riders. Dernas and his Reds had their favorites out there, as did Pallima and the Golds. Venn had two entries, promoted by the Luzo brothers. The last to enter the field, however, was the one Ori cared about: Champion Dey, uvak wrangler from the southlands that Candra represented. Dey saluted Ori and her mother.

"He'll do well, I think," Ori commented.

"He'll die," Candra said.

Ori looked back, surprised. Candra settled into her comfortable chair, indifferent to the drums beating below. Searching her mother's face, Ori realized the truth. These sporting events were always succession struggles by proxy. The rival factions might try to win Candra's favor by allowing her

entry to win, but the newest High Lord wasn't going to agitate Grand Lord Venn. Not today.

"We're going to have to win sometime," Ori grumbled.

"Not today," Candra said. Champion Dey was as good as dead.

The shell-horn sounding, the field dissolved immediately into a cloud of dust and blood. There was no strategy to rake-riding, no posturing. The riders had their lightsabers, but anyone with sense minded the reins and nothing else. Like any Saber, Ori loved a good fight—but this was nothing more than a brawl with animals: titans, lurching about, ripping into one another.

And her family's entry was simply there to dress the place, no better than the flowers in the—

"Look!"

All eyes turned to Champion Dey, whose uvak reared back suddenly on its clawed feet. It charged ahead, razor-tipped wings outstretched. But instead of goring the opponent stumbling haplessly before it, the creature leapt ...

... and *flew*. Wings that shouldn't work pumped mightily, allowing uvak and rider to bound from the melee toward the grandstands.

Dey, standing in his saddle, raised his red lightsaber and screamed something Ori couldn't hear. He was in control, all right. Lighting her own weapon, Ori leapt atop the railing, ready to pounce if he came near. But the lumbering behemoth passed to the left, awkwardly clawing its way upward through the panicked crowd toward the Grand Lord's luxury compartment, above.

Ori saw Lillia Venn stand, unflinching, as the attacker scaled the stone bleachers toward her. Raising her shaking hands, the Grand Lord unleashed a torrent of dark side energy. Blue fire crackling all along its wingspan, the surprised animal fell backward onto the lower seating, throwing its rider free. The Luzos leapt from the royal box, their own weapons red blurs as they plunged toward the would-be assassin.

"Mother, get back!" Ori yelled.

Across the way, a Keshiri aide closed the shutters to the Grand Lord's compartment. Ori now did the same, knocking over large vases of Jelph's flowers in the process. She turned back to see her mother, staggering, paralyzed before the spectacle.

"What happened, Mother?" They'd known Champion Dey for years, supporting his training. What could have caused his mad act?

Candra simply shook her head, blood draining from a face that had looked youthful only moments before. “You ... you’d better go, Ori.”

“The other Sabers are dealing with Dey,” Ori said, guarding the entrance to the compartment.

“That’s not what I mean.”

Ori looked at her mother, stunned. “We didn’t do this. We don’t have anything to worry about. Do we?” She took the older woman’s arm. “Mother, *do we?*”

Summoning some unseen reserve of calm, Candra straightened. “I don’t know what just happened. But I *will* know, one way or another.” She stepped past her daughter and opened the door. Outside, Sith and Keshiri dashed madly down the Korsinata’s exterior ramps.

“Mother!”

Candra looked back with sad eyes. “I can’t talk now, Ori. Just get to the estate and make sure the slaves know I won’t be coming home tonight.” She disappeared into the crowd.

A star fell harmlessly from the sky. Landing on a hill, it provided light through the night, causing the gardens of Kesh to flourish as never before.

Until it rose again, setting everything afire. The stones of Ori’s home fell to dust before the hot wind, exposing her to the inferno. Charred and dying, she’d chased the star into the jungle to ask why it had destroyed her world. It answered: “Because you thought me a friend.”

Ori had experienced the Force vision during her second day as a Tyro, the lowest level in the Tribe’s hierarchy. It had never meant anything to her. But arriving at Starfall, her mother’s country estate south of Tahv, she’d had occasion to remember it. A procession of Keshiri laborers was exiting the marbled mansion, carrying belongings to a pyre on the lawn.

Her laborers. Her belongings.

Leaving Shyn by the columns lining the front walk, Ori ran toward the bonfire. Drawing her lightsaber, she charged the frail purple figure directing the work: her mother’s caretaker.

“What’s going on?” Ori grabbed the man. “Who told you to do this?”

Recognizing his mistress’s daughter, the Keshiri looked furtively to either side before touching Ori’s wrist. He spoke in a low whisper. “This was ordered by the Grand Lord herself, milady. Just a couple of hours ago.”

A couple of hours ago? Ori shook her head. The assassination attempt had only been two hours earlier. How was any of this possible?

The caretaker gestured to the main entrance. There, two apprentices of the Luzo brothers stood in the grand doorway, watching the furniture-laden workers pass. They hadn't noticed her yet, Ori saw—but she'd change that. Ori took a step toward the house.

Clutching at her arm, the old man yanked Ori back. "There are more of them inside," he said, pulling her behind the fire and out of their view. "They're taking your mother's things, too."

"Is she still a High Lord?" Ori asked.

The caretaker looked down.

Another thought struck her. "Am I still a Saber?"

Suddenly sickened, Ori staggered closer to the flames and tried to remember what she'd heard and seen on the way out of the Korsinata. There had been so much chaos. With Champion Dey killed seconds after his failed attack, rumors were attributing his act everywhere. The Red faction claimed her mother had made a dire pact with the Golds, and vice versa. Some claimed Venn had died in her box, succumbing to her exertions and the excitement; others reported seeing the executions of High Lords Dernas and Pallima, right in their boxes at the arena. None of it made sense.

The only thing all agreed on was who brought the assassin into the stadium to begin with: the Kitai family.

She had to get back to Tahv and speak to her loyal apprentices with access to the High Seat. Defenders of her family's interests, they would know what was going on now. It was important not to succumb to anger over the bonfire, an obvious attempt by the Grand Lord's camp to provoke a reaction and reveal disloyalty.

Looking toward the mansion, she smirked. Candra Kitai's political skills were unparalleled. By now, she'd have successfully deflected blame and figured out who the victors were. By the time Ori reached Tahv, Candra would likely be sitting at the right hand of whoever had won out. Now was no time to fall into a clumsy trap set by the Luzos.

"This will be straightened out," she told the caretaker, turning toward her uvak.

"Good-bye, Ori."

Climbing atop Shyn, Ori took the reins in hand. Suddenly she stopped, calling after the retreating Keshiri elder. "Wait. You called me *Ori*."

The Keshiri looked down and wandered away.

By the dark side, she thought. Anything but that.

Jelph tipped the wobbly cart backward, allowing another pile of soil to spill into the trough. As summer went on, the mounds would dry out, becoming more acidic; an alkaline wash tended to refortify the stockpiles. His Keshiri customers didn't know about hydrogen ions, but they were particular nonetheless.

Hearing a sound, Jelph dropped his trowel and stepped around the hut. There, in the waning rays of evening, stood his visitor from the day before, facing her uvak and gripping the bridle.

"I'm surprised to see you," Jelph said, approaching her from behind. "Nothing wrong with the dalsas, I hope?"

Turning, she released the harness. The brilliant brown eyes were full of hurt and anger.

"I've been condemned," Ori of Tahv said. "I'm a slave."

Chapter Three

Jelph poured more of the gritty mixture into her bowl. A Keshiri pauper's dish, the tasteless cereal became something else in his hands, seasoned with spices from his garden and the tiniest morsels of salted meat. Ori didn't know what animal it came from, but now she devoured the meal hungrily. Two days of prideful restraint had been enough.

It was still so strange to see him, here, outside the fields. Each of the past two mornings, he had risen before sunrise, beginning his chores early to have more time for her. He washed in the river before she rose. When it was her turn, he retreated to the corner of the hut that served as his kitchen to preserve her modesty. Ori didn't think she had any, but again, that strange meekness crept in. He was no Keshiri plaything, but a human, even if he was a slave.

As she was.

For some reason, she hadn't told him anything that first night. There was so little he could do, and it was all so far beyond his frame of reference. She'd sat in silence in the doorway of the hut, watching for nothing until she

collapsed. She'd awakened the next morning inside, on the bed of straw he used himself. She had no idea where he'd slept that night, if he'd slept at all.

The second evening, after an untouched dinner, she'd let it all spill out: everything she'd learned in her trip to Tahv. The leaders of the two factions that could never agree on a Grand Lord had indeed fallen to their elderly compromise candidate. The event had given her minions cause to decapitate—literally—the leaderships of the Red and Gold factions.

Ori's mother still lived, her sources assured her, though in the clutches of the vengeful Venn. It was too late for Candra to save her career, but she might yet save her life, if she said the right things about the right people. Like Donellan, Candra had waited too long to choose a side and to put herself forward as a successor. A year had seemed like so little time to be a High Lord. But for Venn, whose every breath was a miracle, the need to outlive her rivals was paramount.

On learning that she'd been condemned to slavery, Ori had dashed to her hidden uvak and flown immediately to the only safe place she knew. After a long moment's hesitation, Jelph had welcomed her—although he'd been less sure of what to do with Shyn. As slaves, neither of them could own an uvak. Remembering the composting barn that had once served as a stable, Ori had urged him to hide the creature there, behind the stalls storing manure. Initially uncertain, Jelph had relented under her pressure. Already feeling sick, she'd heaved as soon as the door to the vile place was opened. She did it again the second night, after relating the full tale of her tiny but important family's downfall.

Jelph had been caring and helpful those times, with his cool river water and washrags handy. Now, in the twilight of the third evening, she was *really* testing the limits of his hospitality. Feeling better, she'd spent the entire day stamping around the farm, going over the events in her mind and plotting her family's return to power, even if the family now was just her. At supper, she'd tested both his knowledge and his patience.

"I don't understand," Jelph said, scraping the bottom of the orojo-shell bowl. "I thought the Tribe expected people to want each other's jobs."

"Yes, yes," Ori said, cross-legged on the floor. "But we don't kill to take them. We kill to keep them."

"There's a distinction?"

Ori dropped her empty bowl to the floor of the hut. *Some dining table*, she thought. "You really *don't* know anything about your people, do you? The

Tribe is a meritocracy. Whoever's best at a job can have it—provided that a public challenge is made. Dernas never made a public challenge to the Grand Lord. Neither did Pallima.”

“Nor did your mother,” he offered, kneeling to retrieve her bowl. He looked slightly startled when she used the Force to levitate it into his hand. “Thanks.”

“Look, it's really simple,” she said, standing and making a futile effort to brush the dirt from her uniform. “If you get to your rivals before they're ready, you can do anything you want—including assassination.”

His brow furrowed as he looked up at her. “It sounds like a bloodbath.”

“Normally we keep it low-key, for order's sake. Poisonings. A *shikkar* blade in the gut.”

“For order's sake.”

She stood in the doorway and glared. “Are you going to criticize, or are you going to help me?”

“I'm sorry,” Jelph said, rising. “I didn't mean to upset you.” He shook his head. “It's just that the thought of having rules for this sort of thing seems, well, odd. There are rules for breaking the rules.”

Ori walked to the bank and looked west. The sun appeared to be sinking into the river itself, setting the water ablaze with orange. It *was* a beautiful place, and she'd fantasized about stolen nights here before. But this wasn't what she had imagined at all. She wasn't going to be able to plot her return from this place. And she'd need more help than a strapping farmhand.

“I have to go back,” she said. “My mother was framed. Whoever did this to us will pay—and I'll have my name back.” She looked back at him, gnawing on a stalk of something he'd pulled from the ground. “I have to go back!”

“I wouldn't do that,” he said, joining her at the riverside. “I suspect your Grand Lord did all of this herself.”

Ori looked at him, amazed. “What would you know about it?”

“Not much, I'll grant you,” Jelph said, chewing. “But if your mother was the key to selecting Venn's replacement, I could see the old woman wanting her out of the way.”

Incredulous, Ori looked into the growing shadows. “Stick to fertilizer, Jelph.”

“Look at it this way,” he said, edging into her field of view. “If Venn didn't stage the assassination and really suspected your mother, you wouldn't

have been condemned. You'd be dead. But the Grand Lord doesn't *have* to kill you, because she knows you didn't do anything. You're more useful as an example." He tossed the stick into the river. "By making slaves out of a High Lord and her family, she's got living, breathing deterrents in front of people for as long as you live."

Ori looked at him, stunned. It made sense. Dernas and Pallima had died out of public view. The bonfire at the estate had attracted the attentions of humans and Keshiri alike. If she had stayed in Tahv, she might already be at work, doing hard labor in full public view.

"So what do I do?"

He smiled, softly, his scar invisible now. "Well, I don't know. But it strikes me that, as long as you still don't sense your mother suffering through your Force, the way to thwart Venn is ... *not to be an example.*"

He didn't say the rest, but she heard it. *The way not to be an example is not to be there.* She looked up into his eyes, reflecting the starlight hitting the water. "How does a farmer know about these things?"

"You've seen my job," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I deal with a lot of things that stink."

She laughed, despite herself, for the first time since she arrived. As she took a step away from the river in the darkness, her footing faltered in the soft ground.

He caught her. She let him.

Standing in the doorway of the hut after midnight, Jelph looked in at her sleeping form on the straw bed. It had been wrong to let Ori stay this long, he thought—and certainly wrong to let things go as far as they had in the last nine days. But then, it had been wrong to encourage her visits to begin with.

Stepping outside, he tightened his tattered robe. After so many sultry days, there was an unseasonable chill in the air tonight. It matched his mood. Ori's presence put everything in jeopardy, in ways she could never imagine. So much more was at stake than the fortunes of one Sith family.

And yet, he'd taken her in. It was a different Ori Kitai that had come to see him, one he couldn't resist. She'd seemed so proud on her earlier visits—full of the noxious entitlement of her people, certain of both her status and herself. With the loss of one, the other had gone. He'd seen the person underneath: tentative and unsure. As angry as she still was over what had

happened, she was also sad over the loss of a vision she had once had of herself. And lately, sadness had been winning out, her days limited to walks from his hut to the garden.

Humility in a Sith. It was an amazing thing to witness, an impossibility. Her armor melted down, the impurities seemed to boil away. Was it possible that not every Sith on Kesh was born venal? Her anger over being dispossessed seemed ... no more than normal. No more than how he would feel, and had felt, in similar situations. It wasn't the kind of fury that destroyed civilizations for sport. It wasn't Sith.

It struck him as wrong that the greatest misfortune in Ori's life had only made her more attractive to him. The reserve he'd worked to develop had fallen away after that night on the riverbank. She had needed him, and it had been so long since anyone had. There wasn't much market for nonentities, in the wilds or anywhere else. But the risk was always there, accompanying the happiness.

He looked to the north. A faint streak of light nestled between the clouds and the hills. The aurora was beginning again. In a couple of nights, the northern sky would be afire. It would soon be time.

Casting a glance to the storehouse, he calculated how long he'd have to be away from the farm. It wasn't safe to have her wandering around in his absence. She would have to go.

But he couldn't let her leave.

Chapter Four

He had left at daybreak, long hejarbo pole in hand to push his craft upriver. Her tranquillity broken, Ori had issued a stream of protests. What did it matter what his customers needed for the autumn growing season? What did he owe those people? All he got for his work was a few items that he couldn't coax out of the ground.

But Jelph had kept looking to the jungle highlands, and to the sky. He'd claimed he had more responsibilities than she knew. Ori had scoffed, longer and louder than she'd intended. That worried her, now, bringing back two of the snares he'd set for the rodents at the edge of the jungle. Jelph hadn't gone away mad, but he had gone away, despite her entreaties.

She didn't like it. He'd been the balm she needed, making all of the heartache go away. She'd been dependent on her mother's office for so much in life that it had been seductively easy to put her existence in his hands. But his leaving had reminded her that he could refuse her. She had power over no one.

And she couldn't live without him. Without Jelph, there was no one else at all.

No one but Shyn. Up ahead, Ori spied the rear door to the composting barn, cracked open to permit circulation. Not even an uvak should have to live in that place, even if the stench came from its kind. Taking a deep breath, she approached. It had taken her most of the day to check and clear the traps, yielding a few of the varmints that Jelph used to supplement his diet. *Wretched*. At least seeing the uvak reminded her that she still had some freedom, some chance to—

Ori's eyes narrowed. Something in the Force had changed. Dropping the traps, she ran to the barn and threw open the rickety door.

Shyn was dead.

The great beast lay bleeding on the dirt floor, deep gashes burned into its long golden neck. Immediately recognizing the wounds, Ori ignited her lightsaber and scanned the building. "Jelph! Jelph, are you here?" Except for a few tools lining the wall, nothing was in here, save the giant mound of filth near the front.

"I told you we'd find her here," came a young male voice from outside. "Just follow the stench."

Ori emerged, weapon held high. The Luzo brothers, her nemeses in the Saber corps, stood out in front before uvak mounts of their own. Flen, the elder, smirked. "Stench of failure, you mean."

"You looking to die, Luzo?" She stepped forward, unafraid.

The pair didn't move. Sawj, the younger brother, sneered. "We've killed two High Lords this week. I don't think we're going to dirty our hands with a slave."

"You killed my uvak!"

"That's different," Sawj said. "You may not know this, but we Sabers are charged with keeping order. A slave can't keep an uvak!"

Filled with hate, Ori stepped forward, ready to charge—only to see Flen Luzo turn toward his uvak.

"Traders told us you liked to come here," he said, opening his saddlebag. "We're here to make a trade." He tossed two scrolls to her feet.

Kneeling, Ori looked at the wax on the parchment. There was her mother's marking, a design known only to her and immediate members of her family. Such a thing was reserved for validating a final testament. Unfurling the scroll, she saw that, in a sense, this was. "This says she plotted with Dernas and the Reds to kill the Grand Lord!"

"And the other says she plotted with Pallima and his people," Flen said, grinning. "She signed both confessions, as you see."

"You could have gotten anything under duress!"

"Yes," Flen said.

Ori scanned the document. Candra Kitai now pledged her eternal loyalty to Grand Lord Venn, who would keep her alive as her personal—very visible—slave. Venn would now be naming three replacement High Lords of her own, Flen said, effectively blocking any moves by what remained of her rivals' camps. Ori could guess from the sound of Flen's voice that the brothers might find themselves suddenly elevated, for their loyalty.

"As I said," Flen added, "we came for a trade. Your lightsaber, please."

Ori threw the scrolls to the dirt. "You'll have to take it!"

He simply crossed his arms. "Your mother told us that you would cooperate. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be the cause of her suffering."

"She's suffering already!" She took another step toward them.

"And then our Sabers will come down here in force and raze this little farm. *And* that farmer boy of yours," he said, eyes glinting evilly. "They already have orders to do so, if I don't bring back your lightsaber."

Ori froze. Suddenly reminded, she looked frantically toward the river. He would be floating home soon.

Flen spoke in a knowing voice. "We don't care what a slave does, or who she does it with. But you're not a slave until we have that weapon." The brothers ignited their lightsabers in unison. "So what's it going to be?"

Ori closed her eyes. She didn't deserve what had happened to her, but he didn't deserve any of it. And he was all she had.

Pressing the button, she deactivated the lightsaber and threw it to the ground.

"Right call," Sawj Luzo said, deactivating his lightsaber and taking hers. Both brothers stepped back to their mounts and climbed aboard.

"Oh," Flen said, reaching for something strapped to his uvak's harness. "We did have a gift from the Grand Lord—to start your new career." He threw the long object, which landed at Ori's feet with a thump.

It was a shovel.

Its metal blade made it truly a treasure: she could see it was forged from one of the few bits of debris from *Omen's* landing. That material had been worked and reworked over the centuries, as Kesh's paucity of surface iron

had become known. A final reward for her former life. Shovel in her hands, she heard the Luzos laughing as they soared away to the north.

Ori looked around at what she had left. The hut. The barn. Mound after mound of the man's mud. And the trellises, home to the dalsas that had brought her here to begin with ...

"NO!"

Anger boiling inside her, she lashed out, striking the frail structures with the shovel. One mighty swing tore the frame apart, sending the flowers crashing to the ground. The hejarbo-shoot wreckage exploded, blown to splinters by the force of her mind.

Infuriated, she charged through the farm, hacking Jelph's wobbly cart to pieces. So much anger, so little to destroy. Turning, she saw the symbol for her dispossession: the composting barn. Swinging, she smashed the door from its hinges and charged inside. Raging through the Force, she yanked at the sorry tools on the walls, sending them flying in a whirlwind of hate. And there was that mound of manure, large and noxious. Twirling, she brought the blade of the shovel down onto it ...

Clang! Striking something beneath the surface of the dung, the shovel ripped free from her hands, causing her to lose her footing in the muck.

Calming as she got to her feet, Ori looked in amazement at the pile. There, beneath the stinking mess, was a soiled cloth covering protecting something large.

Something metal.

Recovering the shovel, she began to dig.

He had felt terrible, leaving Ori with a job that would take her all day. But he had his own trap to check, here under the lush canopy. Jelph hadn't caught anything in months, but his best chances always seemed to coincide with the auroras.

Approaching the secluded knoll, he found his treasure, hidden beneath the giant fronds. He breathed faster in anticipation. All through the recent days of turbulence and tranquillity, he'd felt somehow that something was about to happen. This might be the day he'd been waiting for, after so much time ...

Jelph stopped. Something was happening, but it wasn't here. Looking through the foliage to the west, he had that gut feeling again. Something *was* happening, and it was happening now.

He ran for the boat.

Ori found the strange thing sitting beneath the manure-covered tarp. There actually wasn't that much of the foul stuff piled over it; just enough to give the appearance that what lay beneath was something other than it was.

And what it was, was big—easily the length of two uvak. A great metal knife, painted red and silver, with a strange black bubble sitting atop its rear. Protrusions swept back, winglike, in a chevron, each tipped with two long spears that reminded her of lightsabers.

She'd forgotten the smell, now, breathing faster as she ran her hand across the surface of the metal mystery. It was cold and imperfect, with dents and burn marks all along its length. But the true surprise yet awaited her. Reaching the rounded section in back, she pressed her face against what seemed like black glass. Inside, tucked into an amazingly small space, she saw a chair. An engraved plate sat just behind the headrest, bearing characters looking similar to the ones she'd been taught by her mentors:

Aurek-class Tactical Strikefighter
Republic Fleet Systems
Model X4A—Production Run 35-C

Ori's eyes widened. She saw it for what it was. *A way back in.*

All his life, Jelph Marrian had feared the Sith. The Great Sith War had concluded before he was born, but the devastation done to his homeworld of Toprawa was so complete that he had devoted his life to preventing their return.

He had gone too far, alienating the conservative leaders who ran the Jedi Order. Expelled, he had sought to continue his vigil, working with an underground movement of Jedi Knights devoted to preventing the return of the Sith. For four years, he'd worked in the shadows of the galaxy, making sure the masters of evil were indeed a memory.

Things had gone wrong again. On assignment in a remote region three years earlier, he'd learned of the collapse of the Jedi Covenant. Fearful of returning, he'd headed for the uncharted regions, sure that nothing could ever restore his name and place with the Order.

On Kesh, he had found something that might—wrapped up in his worst nightmare come true. He'd been caught in one of Kesh's colossal meteor

showers, crashing in the remote jungle as just one more falling star. Unable to raise help through Kesh's bizarre magnetic field, he'd ventured down toward the lights he'd seen on the horizon.

The light of a civilization, steeped in darkness.

Still meters from the bank, he leapt from the boat. "Ori! Ori, I'm back! Are you—"

Jelph stopped when he saw the trellises, cut down. Taking in the damage, he dashed toward the barn.

The door was open. There, exposed in the evening twilight, sat the damaged starfighter he'd painstakingly floated down from the jungle, a piece at a time. He found something else, beside it: a metal shovel, discarded. "Ori?"

Stepping into the shadows of the barn, he saw the corpse of the uvak, food for the small carrion birds. Behind the building, he found the traps he'd sent her to check, abandoned on the ground. She had been here—and gone.

In front of the hut, he found other tracks. Wide Sith boots and more uvak prints. Ori's smaller prints were here, too, heading past the hedge up the cart path that led to Tahv.

Jelph reached inside his vest for the bundle he always carried on trips. Blue light flashed in his hand. He was a lone Jedi on an entire planet full of Sith. His existence threatened them—but their existence threatened everything. He had to stop her.

No matter what.

He dashed up the path into the darkness.

Sentinel

Chapter One

3960 BBY

“I think ... I might have ruined my life.”

“Sounds like you met a woman,” the purple-faced bartender said, pouring. “Do you want me to leave the bottle?”

Only if I can smash it over my head, Jelph Marrian thought. It was sweetwater, anyway—nothing that would help him forget. Sweat dripping from his matted blond hair, he drank deeply. The empty mug glistened, its shaped facets catching the firelight. Jelph twirled it in his hand, following the reflections. Since arriving on Kesh, he’d only drunk from orojo shells. But the Keshiri produced such wonderful glassware—even here, to serve guests in a pauper’s way station.

The bartender passed him a bowl of porridge. “Friend, you look like you’ve run all the way from South Talbus.”

“And more.” Jelph didn’t add that he’d been running practically without pause since the previous evening. Now, as the sun set again, he’d stopped, parched and ravenous, here in a hovel nestled in the lengthening shadows of the capital city’s walls. Jelph simply nodded to the pleasant old Keshiri and retreated to a corner with his meal. The natives on Kesh always felt freer

to be familiar with human slaves than they were with the Sith. *They must not have much trouble telling us apart*, he imagined; tonight, his soaked, tattered clothes were probably a tip-off that he wasn't born on high.

In fact, of course, Jelph was the only mortal on Kesh born "on high." He came from space, although he called no planet home. The three years the former Jedi Knight had spent in his little farmhouse on the Marisota River were the longest he'd lived in one place in years. He'd been fortunate to find it. Jelph had discovered the abandoned homestead just days after crashing his starfighter in the jungle highlands, when hunger made him bold enough to go exploring. The original occupant had left long before, probably fearing the stories that the Marisota River was cursed. Sensing the dark side of the Force all around, Jelph had begun to agree—until he ventured north and realized that, in fact, the whole planet was under a curse. Kesh belonged to the Sith.

Jelph had devoted his entire adult life to preventing the return of the Sith to the galaxy. Toprawa had been devastated by the Jedi's war with Exar Kun; Jelph had been born into a world that had already lost all hope. Fatherless, he heard from his mother only horror stories of the Sith occupation. When she disappeared one morning never to return, the young Jelph might have lost hope, too—had it not arrived in the form of Jedi scouts. The woman they introduced him to would save his life.

Krynda Draay had also lost someone on Toprawa—her Jedi husband—and had assembled a Covenant, a collection of Jedi Knights willing to do anything to prevent the Sith's return. Assisting her watchful seers were the Shadows, agents serving her son, another Jedi of great vision. Master Lucien had somehow removed Jelph from the Jedi rolls, giving the young man complete and total mobility. For years, Jelph had been the perfect secret agent, traveling the Outer Rim investigating potential Sith threats while the true Jedi Order occupied itself with matters of less importance. He'd been satisfied with his success ...

... until early in the Republic's war with the armored Mandalorians, when everything changed. Jelph never learned exactly what had happened, beyond that some schism had decapitated the Covenant, revealing his existence, among others. Now regarded by the Jedi as an outlaw, Jelph found flight his only option. What irony that, in selecting Kesh as his refuge, he'd found the very thing that he had sworn to stamp out!

Jelph finished the meal and rubbed his eyes. He'd done everything right until now. After life as a Shadow, hiding from the Sith on Kesh hadn't been difficult. He knew how to shroud his presence in the Force. And the existence of a class of human nobodies made it easy for him to blend in, so long as he lived in the hinterlands and kept his contacts to a minimum. In short order, he had picked up the local dialect and accent, giving him access to the necessities of life. A life spent tending his farm during the days—and working to repair his damaged starfighter at night.

The starfighter. He had completed repairing most of the damage done to the Aurek by the meteor storm; it remained only to reinstall the communications console and select the time and manner of his departure. Then he would have truly been the sentinel he'd intended to be, warning the Republic and Jedi of the Sith, and reclaiming his name.

But he had met *her*. Ori Kitai was of the Sith, and he had gotten too close to her, despite his better judgment. He'd let her distract him from his mission. He'd allowed her into his home. And now she had discovered his starfighter—and had gone, presumably to warn the Sith.

Or had she?

He'd left the farm quickly. There'd been no other choice. He preferred not to launch the starfighter without the communications system, which would take a week to reinstall. Catching Ori first was at least worth a try. But he cursed himself now for not studying the clues more closely. Yes, someone had gone through the shed, killed her uvak, and uncovered the starfighter. But it wasn't clear who had done what. Yes, Ori was missing, and her footprints led away up the trail. But other people riding uvak had recently been there, too, and left. Only enfranchised Sith rode uvak—but all of them were supposedly hostile to Ori, whom they now regarded as a slave. Had something changed? She hadn't left with them, in any event.

His bet was that the Tribe didn't yet know about his secret. If the Sith uvak-riders had discovered his vessel, they would've left someone to protect it. That left Ori. The previous day, when he'd been up in the jungle, he'd felt a profound pang of betrayal from her through the Force. He'd seen the destruction she'd wrought on his tiny farm. And now she was heading toward the capital city with knowledge capable of spreading destruction on a galactic scale.

She had to be. Ori's tracks had vanished before the crossroads, but Jelph remained certain she was bound for Tahv. There was nothing but jungle to

the east, and no one to tell downstream in the abandoned towns of the Ragnos Lakes. With the monsoon rains choking the Marisota River, fords were out to the few southern cities. That left the capital, a city he had never visited. The center of evil on Kesh, home of Grand Lord Lillia Venn and her whole misbegotten Tribe.

He looked out the window toward the now-purposeless city walls. Where might Ori be? Where would she go?

“You don’t look happy, my friend.” The worried old Keshiri took the empty bowl. “I always try to have something to serve for the poor. I’m sorry it’s not better.”

“It’s not that,” Jelph said, remembering himself.

“Ah. The woman.” The old man retreated behind the counter. “I may not be one of your kind, young human, but I can tell you something universal. You let a woman into your life, and anything can happen.”

Jelph stepped toward the door, turned, and bowed. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

The last visitors filed out of the zoo. That was what Ori had always called it, but the true name was something more complicated. Originally a special park honoring Nida Korsin and the Skyborn Rangers, it had since had the names of two or three other Grand Lords affixed to it, though that didn’t seem a particularly high honor to Ori. There had once been wild animals inside, the last members of some of Kesh’s predator species. But the Sith had long since hauled them out and killed them for sport.

Now the facility served as the public home for the uvak mounts used in rake-riding—those few uvak who survived their bouts in that violent sport, anyway. Sith citizens and Keshiri alike came to marvel at the mighty beasts, being pampered and prepared for their matches at the nearby Korsinata.

Lately, though, they had come to see something else. Or, rather, *someone*.

Ori found her mother where she expected to find her—mucking out the uvak stalls. Jelph had been exactly right: Grand Lord Venn had made a public spectacle out of Candra Kitai’s fall from power. Under the watchful eyes of the burly night guard, the deposed High Lord continued the work that she’d done all day for the viewing amusement of the passersby. Still wearing her ceremonial gown from Donellan’s Day, now soiled and frayed, Candra stood on tiptoes, delicately relocating foul deposits with a large shovel.

Looking down from her perch on the roof of the shelter, Ori waited until the guard was right beneath her. Then she leapt downward, kicking out to knock the sentry senseless. Kneeling, she grabbed the man's lightsaber and dragged him into the stall behind the grounded uvak.

Eyes watering from the stench, Candra looked up at her daughter with a tired expression. "You came back."

"Yes."

"It's been weeks and weeks."

"More like two," Ori said, studying her mother. Such a short time since the royal fête, and she could barely recognize the woman. The gray hair always carefully hidden by the Keshiri beauticians was out in straggly force now. Candra stank of every vile thing she'd encountered in her work. Her hands, however, remained free from calluses. Ori could see why as Candra robotically returned to her work, gingerly holding the shovel and making little headway.

"They keep feeding them slop that makes them ill," Candra groaned. "I know they're doing it on purpose."

"You'll never get this job done shoveling that way," Ori said, springing up and seizing the tool. Looking at it for a moment, she suddenly remembered she was not a farmer and threw it aside. "You've been here all this time?"

Candra feebly pointed to the empty stall across the walk. "They let me sleep over there sometimes." Wearily, she looked up at Ori. "You look tired, dear. Have you rested?"

Ori snorted. She'd run all the previous night and day from Jelph's farm after discovering his secret in the shed, finally reaching Tahv an hour before. Now, at last, she was here—and she had something to trade. What was he? Where was he from? REPUBLIC FLEET SYSTEMS, the old characters had said. The Republic, she remembered from her studies, was the tool of the Jedi—the puppet body through which the Jedi Knights ruled the weaklings of the galaxy.

It was definitely information worth something to someone. But who?

"I'm going to get you out of here," she told her mother.

"I can't just leave," Candra said. "They'll find us, wherever we go—and we'll both end up right back here."

Looking quickly back outside the stall, Ori pulled the older woman into the shadows. "I'm not going to break you out. I've ... *discovered* something.

Something that will restore us—restore *you*. You have to get me in to see the High Lords.”

Candra looked at her, bewildered, for a long moment before returning her eyes guiltily to the shovel. “I’d better get back to work, before someone else comes to check on—”

Ori grabbed her mother’s wrists before she could move. “Mother, I need to know who to talk to!”

Shaking her head, Candra fought to evade her daughter’s stare. “No, Ori. I don’t know what you think you’ve found, but nothing will make a difference. We’ve lost.”

“*This* will make a difference!” Ori had no doubt about that. Quickly she explained. There was another starship on Kesh, one in addition to *Omen*. A new one, hidden on a farm beside the Marisota River. Ori’s whisper grew louder with excitement. “This isn’t just about our family, Mother! It’s about reuniting the Tribe with the Sith!”

Candra simply stared at her, unbelieving. “You’ve gone mad. You’ve made this story up, to try to get back in—”

Hearing the guard begin to stir, Ori looked frantically at Candra. “You know the politics. I need to know what to do. Who can I go to?”

At the word *politics*, Candra’s eyes seemed to focus. Looking back mournfully at the shovel, she spoke in low tones. Three of the High Lords were newly appointed stooges of the Grand Lord, she said. But that left four others who might listen—two apiece from the former Red and Gold factions. They formed the balance of political power, and might well reward the Kitai family for bringing them the news first.

“If this is for real, you have to get them down there, to see it for themselves,” Candra said. “Send them messages through Gadin Badolfa, the architect. He sees them all, and I still trust him. Don’t tell them exactly what you’ve found—that way, they’re not compromised for coming to meet you.”

Ori ruminated. The much-demanded Badolfa was highly placed in Sith society, as well connected a figure as one outside the hierarchy could be. The High Lords might not believe the invitations were legitimate, even coming through a trusted family friend like Badolfa—but there wasn’t much choice.

She dragged the guard’s body back out of the stall. She’d passed a nice trough earlier that would make a good temporary home for him; the other guards would assume he was drunk on duty. But she’d keep the lightsaber. It had been only a day since the Luzo brothers had taken hers, but it felt

good to have one in her hand again. “Mother, are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

Leaning on the handle of the shovel, Candra looked long and hard at her daughter. “No, this is the place for me right now. I’d only slow you down.” She looked down at the floor of the stall and grimaced. “And if this plan of yours doesn’t work, don’t trouble yourself for me here. I don’t expect to be around much longer anyway.”

Chapter Two

Hate: pure, and oppressive. Tahv was a monument to it. Jelph felt it in every alley, at every crossroads. The dark side of the Force permeated this place, as nowhere he had ever visited.

Many times while growing up on Toprawa, Jelph had thought he was going insane. He was beset with constant headaches; each waking moment took a toll on him. Only later did he realize that the cause had been his developing Force sensitivity, responding to the psychic scars Exar Kun and his kind had wrought on the world, years before.

But their evil was past. The psychic acid that coursed through the streets of Tahv was alive. It was everywhere. The building he hid against was home to an old Sith man violently castigating a Keshiri servant. The window across the way, beyond which a young couple plotted the deaths of their neighbors. The sentry down the walk, whose memories held things beyond Jelph's worst imaginings.

Jelph tried to shut out the impressions coming at him through the Force without attracting attention to his psychic presence. It was nearly impossible.

The Sith happily broadcast their hatred and anger, like wild animals baying at the stars.

Collapsing against a wall, Jelph doubled over. Too late, he realized it hadn't been a good idea to eat before coming here. He rose, gasping and wiping the sweat from his forehead. How many Sith lived here? he wondered. In Tahv? On Kesh? He'd never known. He was ostensibly a scout for the Jedi, even if they didn't recognize him as such; he'd wanted to deliver a full report on his eventual return. But every time he'd gone near any population center, he'd fallen ill. Including now, when he most needed his faculties.

Jelph struggled to collect his thoughts. *Ori*. He needed to find Ori. Her name, her face would be his lifeline. She was why he was here—and why he hadn't left.

He knew her presence through the Force very well, but had no hope of finding it in the sea of harsh feeling that was Tahv. He wondered how she had ever survived here. Her dark nature had never seemed to him in the same class with the other Sith of Kesh, however much she postured. Ori was proud, not venal; indignant, not hateful. He would have recoiled at her touch, had she been otherwise. He *had* to be right about her.

But what if he was wrong? Was she even here?

Jelph was about to surrender to the despair surrounding him when he saw something that stirred a memory. In one of their first meetings, Ori had bragged about how none of the other Sabers had her knowledge of the city's aqueduct system. It was her territory to patrol, with her apprentices. Jelph looked up to see one of several towering stone edifices stretching high across the city, bringing down water from the highlands. First constructed by the Keshiri, the system had been improved by the early Sith, who added storage reservoirs dozens of meters off the ground. Ori was right: from up there, all of Tahv could be seen. *And hopefully not felt*, he thought.

He crossed into the shadows beneath a massive aqueduct support, a pillar nearly the size of a city block. The dark side sensation wasn't so bad there. Jelph scaled the support, careful to stay constantly in the darkness until he reached the top.

With a wide ledge on either side channeling rushing waters, the stone flume was the size of a city street. Lying prone on the ledge, Jelph marveled that the Keshiri had been able to build, in effect, a river in midair long before the Sith had arrived. What might they have accomplished unmolested?

Shaking his head, he reached for his shoulder pouch and removed his macrobinoculars.

Studying the area, he noticed a mountain range looming far to the west. It filled him with dread. He'd heard that the Sith kept their wrecked starship there, in a temple. Would they be able to use materials from his fighter to repair it? Or would one Sith simply try to leave in his fighter, planning to return later for the others? Either way, finding Ori was the important thing now. Turning his attention back to the city below, he set the visor to night vision and scanned the streets leading to the great palace. Would she have gone there, even knowing what Grand Lord Venn had done to her family? Straining to see farther, he dared to stand.

"Ori, where *are* you?"

Suddenly an unseen hand slammed him backward into the coursing water. The macrobinoculars tumbled from his grasp, bouncing once on the ledge and shattering unseen on a marble rooftop far below. Once he touched bottom in the meter-deep canal, Jelph kicked his work boots against the greasy stone floor and launched himself up—only to go flying back again, pushed by the Force. Unable to right himself, he tumbled down the flume.

The current subsided, depositing him in a collecting pool—lower down, but still many meters above the nearby rooftops. He struggled to the shallow end, unclipped his lightsaber from his belt, and lit it. Blue light flashing in the night, Jelph staggered about in the waist-deep water, looking for his assailant.

"*Liar!*"

The call had originated up the flume. There Jelph saw the silhouette of a woman launching toward him, brandishing a crimson lightsaber. With both hands on his weapon, he deflected the powerful blow, allowing the force of the woman's attack to carry her into the reservoir with him. She regained her footing quickly and struck again.

"Liar!" Ori repeated, her normally brown eyes blazing with orange.

"You found it," Jelph said, bringing his lightsaber against hers in a crackling deadlock. It was all he could think to say.

Ori snarled something inaudible and kicked through the water at him. Jelph sidestepped the move, causing them both to lose footing—and causing Ori to lose her lightsaber to the deeper portion of the basin.

Seeing her splashing about, looking for the weapon, Jelph stepped back to give her room. “You found it,” he said, deactivating his lightsaber. “You found it—and you destroyed the garden. I don’t blame you.”

“I blame you!” Standing again, she jammed her hand in the water, fruitlessly. “You’re a liar. You’re a *Jed!*”

“I was,” he said. There was no point in denying it. “That was my spaceship you found. Thank the Force you didn’t try to get inside—”

“What? You don’t think I’m *smart* enough?” Dripping, she glared back at him. “I’m just some stupid groundling to you—no better than the Keshiri!”

“That’s not it!”

“We came from space, you know. And we’ll be going back! Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“Yes—among other things.” Suddenly remembering where he was, Jelph looked nervously above. The reservoir was too high for them to be heard from beneath, but he’d seen aerial sentries earlier. At least he’d found her. “What ... what are you doing here?”

Ori stomped around in the water, still unable to find her lightsaber. “I came to Tahv to tell them about you! To warn them!”

“Up here?” He’d expected her to head off to see someone of importance. He studied her as she shook the water from her hair. “Wait. You *did* see someone important. Your mother.”

The Sith woman simply glowered.

“I thought your mother wasn’t in power anymore—”

“That’ll change!” Ori’s face filled with rage. “With what we know now, she’ll be back! *I’ll* be back!”

Jelph stepped backward, as if shoved by the force of her words. “This isn’t like you,” he said. “The person who stayed with me those days didn’t care about that anymore. That person—”

“That wasn’t *me*,” Ori spat. “That was *defeat*!”

“But I liked the other you—and I don’t care what you call it. That was a part of you.”

“That person wasn’t Sith!” She pointed to the stars, peeking out from the clouds high above. “Those belong to us! It’s not just about me. We’ve lived here a thousand years, waiting to get back there. Waiting to get back to what’s *ours*!”

Jelph began to say something, but stopped. “That’s right,” he whispered, calculating. The Tribe was a remnant from the Great Hyperspace War, more than a millennium before. She didn’t know what had followed.

He had a weapon. *History*.

“There are no more Sith,” Jelph said.

“What?”

“There are no more Sith,” he repeated. “They’re extinct.”

“You’re lying,” Ori said, wading toward the edge. “That vessel you were hiding was a warship! Those big ... *prongs* on either side of it. Are you telling me those are for decoration?”

Jelph shook his head. “Yes, we have enemies. And we’ve even fought Sith in living memory. A Jedi, Exar Kun, fell to the dark side and revived the movement. But they were eradicated. Hunted down—all of them.” Carefully, he edged his way toward her. “As far as I know, your people are the only Sith left alive in the galaxy. Feel my thoughts. You’ll know I’m telling the truth.”

Breathing hard, Ori looked back at him. Her anger spent, she hoisted herself onto the edge of the basin and pulled off her boot. Water poured from it. “We’ll rise,” she said, calmer now. “Alone against one Jedi, or a billion. We’ll take our chances.”

“You’ll be crushed by the Jedi.”

“Does anyone even know we exist?” she asked. “If the Sith haven’t been looking for us, I doubt the Jedi have.”

“They’re looking for me,” he said. “And believe me, the Jedi are looking for you.” He didn’t know what had become of all the members of the Covenant since he’d fled—but he knew as long as Lucien Draay lived, someone would be watching for the Sith.

Ori rubbed her forehead, exasperated. “If I can’t save my family—and I can’t save my people—then what am I supposed to do?”

“Supposed to do?” Jelph laughed. “You’re the one that always says you set your own course.” He waded toward her perch on the edge. “Just decide what you want.”

For a long moment, Ori looked at him, standing in the starlit water before her. Finally, she closed her eyes and shook her head. “We’ll never be able to trust each other,” she said.

Jelph looked at her searchingly.

She opened her eyes and glared at him. “I can feel it in your thoughts. You think I’m beautiful. You think you want me. You want to trust me. But you’re looking behind every word I say, trying to find me out, trying to trap me. Because of who I am.”

Jelph looked down at the water. He hadn’t known why he had come all this way when so much was at risk. Not until now. “I think I know who you are, Ori.” He stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder. She shrank at his touch.

“Jelph,” she said, grabbing at his hand but not pushing it away. “I can’t be the person I was back at the farm. If the only way to be with you is to be *weak*, I just can’t do it.”

“You *can* be strong,” he said, reaching for her and pulling her off the ledge, down into the water before him. Her feet touching the bottom, she looked up at him. “You *are* strong,” he said. “You just don’t have to rule the galaxy.”

She looked away from him, down at the pool. “It’s what we’re born to do, you know. To rule the galaxy.”

“Then the Tribe is built on a trick,” he said. “A deception. Everyone is fighting over something that only one person can have. Just one. Which means that to be a Sith—is to be an *almost certain failure*. Almost everyone who follows your Code is doomed to fail, even before he starts.” Jelph chortled. “What kind of philosophy is that?” Nudging her chin upward with his hand, he looked into her eyes, brown again. “Don’t be tricked. You can’t lose if you don’t play.”

He kissed her, uncaring what any Sith aerial sentry saw. Ori returned the embrace before pulling back. “Wait,” she said. “We’re *already* playing. It’s in motion. I can’t stop it.”

“What do you mean?”

Dark brow furrowed, Ori explained what her mother had suggested she do. “I’ve already sent word to the rival High Lords,” she said. “They’re going to meet me at your farm to see the spaceship.”

Shocked back to reality, Jelph released her. “What ... what did you say to them?” Stunned, he climbed out of the reservoir.

Ori followed, appealing to him. Her mother had given her a phrase to use—code within the tiny High Lord community for a discovery of Kesh-shaking importance. “I didn’t tell them about the spaceship, but they know

it's important," she said. "They're supposed to meet me there tomorrow at sunset."

"Sunset!" Jeph sagged. It had taken him a full day and night just to get here on foot. "How were you going to get there?"

"I was going to steal an uvak," Ori said, standing atop the ledge and pointing up to a dark figure in the sky. "It's why I came up here—I knew from the aqueduct, I could lure one of the aerial sentries down here." She looked back at him petulantly. "Of course, that was when I still had a lightsaber."

"Lucky thing you made a friend," he said, standing on the ledge beside her and looking up at the hovering sentry. He smiled. "You know, Ori, you're the first Sith I've ever fought."

"You may need to try harder against this one," she said, watching his lightsaber come to life. "We're not all so easily charmed."

Chapter Three

It felt good to fly again. Ori looked down at the countryside slipping away beneath the uvak's beating wings. Every so often, she turned back to see Jelph, clinging to her as she pulled the reins. He was still smiling. Flight was no mystery to him, she knew—but he'd lived for three years on the ground, looking up at flying Sith. This was a welcome change.

She wondered what flying in his spaceship would be like. She knew now why he hadn't simply flown away in it earlier—but now that they'd found each other, they needn't be bound to Kesh any longer. They'd be an uncomfortable fit in the one-seat vehicle, and she knew he wanted to reinstall some kind of communications system before departing. But even though they hadn't discussed it, she fervently hoped for that escape.

What would life be like for her, a child of the Tribe in a Jedi-dominated galaxy? Much like Jelph must have felt these past years, she imagined. She was beginning to think that way now. Empathy was a trait the Sith understood only as a means of better knowing one's enemy; it had no practical purpose otherwise. Ori had begun to see things differently.

Take Candra, for example. There were many reasons Ori had wanted to restore her mother's past position—but most revolved around pride, vengeance, and shame over her current state. It was more important, she now realized, to simply improve her mother's life by getting her out of Venn's clutches. The four High Lords could do that, Gadin Badolfa assured her when she'd contacted him. She just needed something to give them in trade instead of Jelph's spaceship. Jelph had suggested the four functioning blasters he had hidden at home; she could claim to have discovered them in a grave somewhere. All the weapons they had from *Omen's* crew were long since exhausted. The discovery of charged ones could make a difference in the violent politics of the High Lords.

"We're not going to make it in time," Jelph said. Their uvak hadn't wanted to carry two strange riders and had fought them all the way. "What's that up there?"

Ori looked up to see a flying V of uvak—a lone figure trailed by three more on either side—soaring through the air high above them. "Blast it!" They'd found the jet stream, she realized. "They're going to get there first!"

"Steady," Jelph said. His hold on her tightened. "But faster!"

Ori allowed Jelph to leap free out of sight of the farm before touching down. She watched as he nimbly hit the dirt and rolled into the cover. It was so surprising to see him in action, as physically able in every way as a Sith Saber. And stealthy, too. The visitors, their creatures parked behind the farmhouse, hadn't seen a thing.

Taking a deep breath, Ori dismounted. The sack of blasters was right where Jelph had said it was, beneath the mixing trough. They looked much like the ones she'd seen in the museum. Hopefully, they'd be enough to buy her mother's redemption—and to make the visitors leave.

Under her breath, she rehearsed what she would say as she rounded the farmhouse past the destroyed trellis. She knew which four of the High Lords to expect. Sensing familiar dark presences, she called out. "My Lords, I have what you're looking for ..."

"Yes, I think you do."

Ori turned ashen at the sound of the croaking voice. *The Grand Lord!*

Pale and shrunk, Lillia Venn emerged from the stable. Raising a mottled hand, she grasped Ori through the Force, immobilizing her. Four of her

loyal guards appeared from behind the barn and took physical hold of Ori. Turning, the Sith leader called into the barn. “Lords Luzo!”

Ori felt her spine turn to jelly as Flen and Sawj Luzo opened the stable doors behind Venn, revealing the metallic mass of the Aurek strikefighter inside. She’d heard from Badolfa that Venn had elevated Flen and Sawj Luzo to Lordships for their loyalty. Now the conniving brothers had returned to the farm—with her worst enemy. “How did it happen?” Ori asked, struggling against the guards. “Did Badolfa betray me?”

“Oh, we let Badolfa deliver your messages,” Sawj Luzo said, squeaky voice high with delight. “Your mother made another deal.”

“*What?*”

“Yes,” Venn said, turning and hobbling back inside. “She didn’t think your discovery existed—and she didn’t think the other High Lords would come. So she alerted us to the meeting here.”

Ori looked horrified. “In exchange for what?”

Venn licked her dry lips. “Call it ... *improved working conditions*. Had any High Lords arrived, I would have had them for treason.” She gestured to the space vehicle. “But this is a much better prize.”

Straining against her captors, Ori looked around. Jelph was out there, she knew—but there were so many of them. And now the elder Luzo brother was helping the Grand Lord through the partially dug manure in the stable toward her discovery.

“I did it,” Venn said, triumphantly. “I’ve lived to see the day.” She released her hold on her escort’s arm and leaned against the starfighter. “Life is a cruel joke, Lord Luzo. You spend your years reaching the pinnacle of power—only then everyone thinks it’s time for you to die.”

“None of us, Grand Lord.”

“Shut up.” She stroked the cold metal of the vehicle. “Well, Lillia Venn’s life is not over. There is another peak, another place to conquer. I will begin again—in the stars.” Vaguely aware of the shifting feet of her allies behind her, she added: “I will take you all with me, of course.”

“Of course, Grand Lord.”

Outside, two of the guards—once Ori’s fellow Sabers—stepped away from Ori, their attention drawn to the excitement inside. Neither they nor her two remaining captors noticed the discarded, unopened sack of blasters behind them, silently levitating toward the bushes beside the farmhouse. But Ori did, beginning to move even before she heard Jelph’s mental call.

Ori! Down!

Instead of wresting free to run, Ori threw her weight to the ground, surprising the men holding her arms. The distraction was enough for Jelph, who emerged from the farmhouse firing. Brilliant beams not seen on Kesh since the first century of occupation struck the two guards from behind. Ahead, the remaining Sabers turned in shock.

Inside, Venn's aged form came alive. She glared at her new Lords. "Secure this place!"

Jelph charged the yard, firing anew. The remaining Sabers, who had never deflected a blaster bolt in their lives, moved frantically to parry the energy. Ori rolled on the ground, trying to find one of the fallen guards' lightsabers. Ahead, she saw the Luzo brothers standing guard in the doorway to the stable—while behind them, the Grand Lord had somehow clambered atop the starfighter.

No, she saw with a start. Not atop the vessel. *Inside.*

Ori spun toward Jelph, who'd arrived beside her. He saw it, too. For a moment he froze, his blasterfire stopping. The crone was inside his precious starship. He grabbed Ori's arm and helped her stand.

Firing again at the Luzos and their guards, he pulled at her arm. "Ori, let's go!"

Suddenly thrown into motion, Ori looked back at the barn. He clearly didn't understand. "Jelph, no! The Grand Lord is here," she called. "What are you doing?"

Jelph didn't answer. Instead he pushed her forward. Away from the barn—toward the river.

Inside, the old woman reached for the throttle.

A tinny voice came from the compartment. "Automatic navigation system engaged. Hover mode activated." Venn's eyes opened wide as she began her ascent.

Outside the Aurek, the Luzo brothers ordered the surviving Saber to guard the entrance against Ori and her unknown protector. The rear stable doorway accommodated wide-winged uvak; it would easily permit the exit of a hovering starfighter.

"Such power," Sawj Luzo said, watching the metal monster rise. "She won't even need us to sever the moorings."

“Moorings?” Flen looked beneath the ship. Two tiny monofilament cords tied around the landing struts were just visible now in the light. As the lines pulled taut, the young Lord’s yellow eyes darted to the other ends, buried in the muck where the vessel had parked.

There, in the ground, tiny pins snapped—and brought down a Dark Lord’s dreams.

The security device had gone in before Jelph had brought the first starfighter part down from the jungle. The Aurek had sat hidden beneath a mound of manure in the barn—but beneath it was buried something else: two of the ship’s proton torpedoes, surrounded by thousands of kilograms of ammonium-nitrate-based explosive. Transforming the fertilizer into something fit for an anti-theft system had required much patience and care—but it had given Jelph a way to turn his nominal job into something helpful to his mission.

Now the anti-theft system worked exactly as planned. When the cables yanked upward, triggers snapped shut on the torpedo warheads. The weapons detonated, igniting the surrounding explosives.

Thunder struck the farm as the fireball ripped and tore itself free from the surrounding clay, consuming the stable and its occupants in milliseconds. Outside, Jelph tackled Ori, plunging them both into the water even as the shock wave shredded the ground behind them.

Jerked through the disintegrating barn roof, the strikefighter rode aloft on a geyser of heat and force. For a split second the woman inside rejoiced at the motion, assuming it a natural demonstration of the vehicle’s power. Her elation ended when, the vessel’s shielding inoperative, the other four torpedoes detonated in their launch tubes. Night laborers as far away as Tahv saw the new comet flash into being and die just as quickly, bathing the southern sky with an eerie light.

Lillia Venn had found her way to the sky.

Chapter Four

The little hut was taking shape. Under a dense canopy of foliage no uvak scout could penetrate, the new structure sat atop a relatively dry lump in the middle of the thicket. The hejarbo shoots grew much stronger up here in the jungle; if it weren't for Jelph's lightsaber, Ori never would have cleared the grounds.

Eight weeks had passed since the blast claimed the farm. Jelph and Ori had descended from the jungle only once, under cover of night, to investigate what was left. There wasn't anything to see. The entire riverbank had fallen into the Marisota River. Dark waters eddied and swirled over the blast crater. All that remained was the stub of a weed-covered path terminating at the river's edge. The pair had returned to the jungle that night confident that no one would learn there had ever been a starfighter on Kesh. Ori had laughed for the first time in days, quoting her mother's favorite line.

"The Confidence of the Dead End."

Since that trip, their focus had been entirely on carving a place for themselves in hiding. There was no returning, Ori now realized; not after her mother's betrayal. Venn's death certainly had been broadcast through

the Force—and just as certainly, would have set the remaining High Lords against one another all over again. The game was renewed; maybe Candra might even find a role to play. Ori wanted nothing to do with any of it. That part of her was past.

And if no one mourned Lillia Venn, no one had come to look for Ori and Jelph, either. In fact, the two of them had spied fewer Sith and Keshiri in the surrounding lands of late than usual. Presumably, a Grand Lord vanishing mysteriously in an area feared as haunted since the tragedy of the Ragnos Lakes would have that effect.

It was fine with her. Ori had a new vision for herself now—based on an old story she'd heard as a child. Keshiri legend held that soon after the Sith arrived, some of their native population had escaped over the ocean. They'd chosen a one-way trip to privation and likely death over lives of service to the Tribe. Today's more devoted Keshiri told it as a cautionary tale: choice of destiny was a luxury reserved for the Protectors, not their servants. The cost of arrogance, for a servant, was isolation.

Ori saw it differently. If the exodus really had happened, whoever had led those slaves away was the greatest Keshiri of all time. Their fates had been decided—and defied. Jelph was right. There had to be a way to win at life besides climbing to the top of a fractious order—only to be stabbed by a shikkar or poisoned by a presumed ally. Had Venn been happy, she wondered, being immolated in her moment of triumph? The Tribe members seemed as hopelessly bound to their paths as the Keshiri who remained slaves. And they thought they were smarter?

Looking to the sun vanishing between the trees, Ori began cutting down the last of the meter-length shoots that would form their side door. It felt strange using the Jedi's weapon, she thought. All the lightsabers the Sith on Kesh used were red, but some of the original castaways kept captured Jedi lightsabers as trophies. She had seen a green one in the Korsin Museum. This one's color was strange and beautiful, a brilliant blue found nowhere in nature. The only artifact of Jelph's alien origin.

Well, not the only one, she thought, extinguishing the lightsaber.

That's where he was now, she knew. As usual, he had risen at dawn to trap breakfast and gather their fruit for later. While offering nothing like the gardening conditions in the lowlands, the jungle provided other means of sustenance year-round; in this latitude, she doubted she would notice when winter came. He spent the rest of his day building their shelter, before

retiring, at dusk, as he always did, to keep vigil beside the device—the one part of his space vessel he hadn’t brought down to the farm. She walked there now, to the spot in the trees where Jelph sat on a stump for hours, staring at the dark metal case and fiddling with its instruments.

He hadn’t kept it from her. For the Sith, the “transmitter,” as he called it, could be as explosive a discovery as the starfighter. Jelph had kept it for what it represented: his lifeline to the outside. He’d never been able to get a message out; as he explained it, something about Kesh and its shifting magnetic field prevented such attempts. That might not be a permanent situation, but it could be centuries before it changed. Ori wondered if that same phenomenon had thwarted the castaways centuries before. All he was able to do was set the device to scan for signals from the ether, recording them for later playback. Perhaps, if some traveler came near enough, he might be able to get a message to the beyond. She now understood his trips upriver in earlier months: he came to the jungle to see what sounds he’d snared.

Normally, he heard nothing but static. But whatever Jelph had just heard had thrown him.

“I can’t go back,” he said, looking blankly at the device.

Ori looked at the flashing thing, not understanding. “What happened?”

“I caught a signal.” It took him several moments to be able to say the words. “The Jedi are at war with one another.”

“What?”

“A Jedi named Revan,” he said. “When I lived there, Revan was like us—trying to rally the Jedi against a great enemy.” Jelph swallowed, finding his mouth dry. “From the sound of it, something’s gone wrong. The Jedi Order has split. It’s at war with itself.”

Jelph replayed the recorded message for her. A fragment of a warning from a Republic admiral, it cautioned listeners that no Jedi could be trusted. The ages-old compact between Republic and Jedi had been sundered. Now there was only war.

The message ended.

Shaken, Jelph deactivated the device. “This ... is *our* fault. The Covenant.”

“The Jedi sect you belonged to?”

“Yes.” He looked up in the twilight, unable to find any evening stars through the foliage. “And that’s the trouble. There aren’t supposed to *be* any

Jedi sects. The Order is divided now—but we divided it first.” He shook his head. “May the Force help them all.”

He turned his gaze to the wilderness again. Ori let him sit in silence. It occurred to her that during all her days of complaining about the world she had lost, Jelph was living with the loss of a whole galaxy. And he was losing it again now.

At last, he stood and spoke. “I don’t know what to do, Ori. We kept the Tribe from discovering a way off Kesh. But I always held out hope that with the transmitter, I could make contact one day. Make contact,” he said, looking back at her for a moment, “to get us out of this place.”

“And to warn them about my people,” Ori said.

Jelph looked away. There was no avoiding the truth. “Yes.”

Ori touched his shoulder. “It’s only fair. I tried to warn my people about you.”

“Well, it’s pointless now,” he said, stooping to lift a stone from their future front garden. “If the Jedi are divided—or, worse, if Revan or someone else has fallen to the dark side—then bringing a planetful of Sith to their attention is the worst thing I could possibly do for the galaxy.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “You could be wrong. The Jedi could still come here and wipe everyone out.”

“Yes, I could be wrong.” Laughing to himself, he looked at her. “You know, that’s the first time anyone’s heard me say that. Maybe if I’d said it more often back home, I wouldn’t be here now.” He tossed the stone into the stream and knelt again. “I’ve lived my whole life thinking I knew what I was supposed to do. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do *now*.”

Watching him, Ori saw the look she’d seen in him in her previous visits to the farm. It was the expression he’d worn when toiling in the muck. Then he had been doing something unpleasant, but he’d been doing it because he had to do it, to keep his garden alive and his customers happy. His duty.

Duty. The term didn’t mean the same thing to the Sith. In the Sabers, Ori had had missions she was charged to perform—but she had taken them on as personal challenges, not out of some loyalty to a higher order. The galaxy didn’t have the right to give her odd jobs. Truly free beings had lives. *Slaves* had duties.

And now Jelph was suffering, certain that he had *some* duty to perform, but unsure what it was. What service did he owe the galaxy—a galaxy that had already cast him out?

"Maybe," Ori said, "maybe Sith philosophy has the answer for you."

"What?"

"We're taught to be self-centered. We don't think *us* and *them*. It's just *you*, versus everyone else. No one else matters." Placing her arms around him from behind, she looked out at the dark stream, burbling quietly past on its way to feed the Marisota River. "The Sith cast me out. The Jedi cast you out. Maybe neither side deserves our help."

"The only side worth saving," he said, turning toward her, "is ours?"

She smiled up at him. Yes, she had been right from the beginning. He was so much more than a slave. "Give it a try, Jedi," she said. "If I can do something selfless—then maybe it's time for *you* to do something selfish."

He looked at her for a long moment, a twinkle in his eye. Wordlessly, he broke the embrace and stepped over to the receiver. Uprooting it, he grinned at her. "Shall we?"

Ori watched him cradle the blinking machine for a moment before she realized what he intended. Exhaling, she stepped over and helped him carry the transmitter to the side of the stream. With one great heave, they tossed it in. Striking a shoal beneath the current, the contraption splintered noisily into shards. They watched together for a moment as bits of casing bobbed and vanished into the darkness. Then they turned back toward their house.

The cords were cut.

It was time to live.

Pantheon

Chapter One

3000 BBY

Time is a lover, the old saying went: a Sith lover. She tempts you with forever—and then cuts you and leaves you for dead.

Staring into the reflecting pool, Varner Hilts studied the latest scar from time, his one and only long-term relationship. No, he couldn't blame this on a trick of the light, or the polluted water. It was real. A fresh crack ran straight from his left eye to his temple. Turning his head and looking more closely, he swore. Why wasn't there at least a matching wrinkle on the other side? Time wasn't big on symmetry.

Hilts was well on his way to becoming the most worthless construct in all creation: an elder in a Sith society. It was the great irony of the Tribe on Kesh. A man without enemies lived long, but had no future. By virtue of his unique calling, Hilts had managed to survive decades of tumult—but for what? So he could spend thirty more years walking past the same basin, observing his decline every day on his way to work?

Well, traditions are important, Hilts thought. Kneeling over the reflection, he brought his hand to his face and squinted. Slowly, his finger traced the new crevasse ...

CRACK!

Ancient stone shattered. Startled, Hilts looked up. High above, a section of Tahv's suspended aqueduct heaved and gave way, shearing loose from its towering support.

"Caretaker!"

Before Hilts could fully stand, a purple blur appeared from the alley. The Keshiri male dived headlong into Hilts's paunch, knocking the human backward. Giant slabs of stonework smashed to the street, pulverizing the rim of the basin where Hilts had knelt moments before.

Flat on his back on the pavement, Hilts reached through the Force and deflected chunks of debris from himself and his rescuer. But no power could stop the crush of brackish water cascading down from the shattered sluice. The Keshiri shielded Hilts as best he could until the shower of water and rocks subsided.

Coughing, Hilts recognized his savior. "Trying to score points with the boss, Jaye?" As he spoke, he rose, shaking grimy water from his sparse silvery hair.

"I-I'm sorry for pushing you, Master Hilts," the Keshiri stammered. "I was passing this way—"

"Calm down." Hilts knew it was a useless instruction, even though Jaye was officially his to command. The moon-faced native had no more chance of relaxing than Hilts had of becoming Grand Lord. "Just a normal day in 'the Crown of Kesh.'"

"It's the *conjunction*," Jaye said, wiping his superior's cape. Nervous black eyes scanned the now-broken skyline of the capital city. "The omen I've been telling you about!"

"And telling me. And telling me." Hilts spied a crowd of humans quarreling near the fallen aqueduct section. Pinning blame, it seemed, was Tahv's only growth industry. He pulled his aide's sleeve. "Let's get to the office before someone decides *we* brought it down by breathing heavily!"

* * *

In an earlier day, Sith on Kesh bided their time to achieve power, temporarily following others in order to one day claim the prize. For most in that simpler era, Yaru Korsin's power structure of High Lords, Lords, and Sabers worked as a means to an end. The hierarchy survived because it served the purposes of enough people—people with the power to defend

the system against those who would destroy it. For more than a thousand years after the founder's death, the Tribe had thrived.

But the Second Millennium brought unrelenting tribulations. Grand Lord Lillia Venn had vanished more than nine hundred years earlier on what the Keshiri locals remembered, rather ineloquently, as the Night of the Upside-Down Meteor. It had certainly presaged doom for *Omen's* grandchildren. Learning of her disappearance, Venn's rivals attacked her supporters first—and then one another. Defeated combatants quit the capital city and took to the hinterlands, where many found common cause with disenfranchised human slaves. Increasing numbers of Sith pressed peace-loving Keshiri into their forces. For centuries, factions united long enough to conquer Tahv and slay the ruling Grand Lord—only to immediately begin fighting among themselves. One rebel force became two, which became twenty. Power in the Tribe poisoned whoever tasted it.

A quarter century earlier, Hilts had famously coined the term for the age, but it hadn't required much imagination. "The Time of the Rot" was visible everywhere. Under successive sieges, the rich streets of Tahv decayed. Left untended, towering aqueducts clogged and overflowed; the morning's calamity was an all-too-familiar occurrence. Far to the south, the Sessal Spire raged as it never had in Keshiri memory, unleashing an explosion so thunderous that one face of the great arena, the Korsinata, collapsed. It was as if the planet itself were fighting back against its émigrés from beyond.

But nestled in a small corner of the eroding marble of the capital building, one place had remained free of neglect: the office of the Caretaker. Amid all the battles between Grand Lords and Antilords, only it had remained untouched.

It wasn't because the Sith had any fear of sacrilege. Varner Hilts's office, outside the traditional power structure, had been established in Nida Korsin's time to provide the Tribe with accurate timekeeping and a historical archive. It was a lifetime appointment, in part because so few candidates were interested. No one desired the Caretaker's lot; his only followers were a roomful of Keshiri clerks, unsuited for service in anyone's army. Not that Hilts was ever actually in demand. A historical polymath, he had been told early on that with his lightsaber skills, he need never worry about a treacherous ally. No one would dare stand near him, for fear of accidental dismemberment.

Stepping from the anteroom into the beaders' hall, Hilts again heard the clickety-clack that had greeted him for half his life. Seated on their knees in a semicircle, brown-clad Keshiri worked at handheld counting frames constructed from seashells and young hejarbo shoots. Hilts discarded his dripping cape and strode through the room, barely wondering what they were working on today. Jaye kept the figurers busy, most of the time, calculating dates to go along with the bits of trivia Hilts scraped from the archives. He'd often marveled at their precision. For a species that lacked basic mathematics when *Omen* crashed, the Keshiri had embraced calculation as vigorously as they had all their other arts.

Grabbing an abacus from a co-worker, Jaye followed Hilts into the sunlit atrium. Centuries before, the first Grand Lord, Yaru Korsin, had watched his nephew Jariad dueling here—knowing even then, Hilts suspected, that Jariad was planning to betray him. Now the Sandpipes dominated the room. Silently tended by watchful tan-clad Keshiri girls, the towering network of powder-filled glass vials kept time for the Tribe. *As if time could be bottled up*, Hilts thought, scratching the side of his face.

"I want to be able to see my reflection in those pipes," he ordered. "I don't have to tell you what a big day we have coming up."

He didn't. The workers shined the massive device more urgently, careful not to interfere with its functioning. For the first time in their young lives, visitors were coming to their place of work. No Grand Lord or pretender had lived in the palace for six hundred years; Korsin's architects had designed for beauty, not defense. Testament Day was the only time the building saw visitors.

Every twenty-five years, on the anniversary of Korsin's death, listeners heard his final testament again. Fifty years earlier, Hilts had been a boy, not allowed into the palace—but the idea of communing with the past had captured his imagination. Through study and toil, he had made certain that, when the next Testament Day arrived, he would be the one to manage the event.

Now, like a comet, the day had come around yet again. But the palace today was a much shabbier place, beyond his resources to repair. Glancing at the cracks in the smoked-glass windows in the ceiling, Hilts just couldn't get excited.

Jaye didn't have that problem. "They've confirmed it, Caretaker!" the Keshiri squeaked, abacus shaking in his hand. "My calculations about the Sandpipes—"

"—Aren't important right now," Hilts said, "unless you intend to grab a cloth and help clean them." He regarded the young women at their work. At least some parts of the room would look good. "We've got twelve days. We'll be ready."

The clerk bit his lip. "Can we really be ready? This ... this is a mystical convergence. No—a *holy* one."

Hilts rolled his eyes. Jaye didn't just love his numbers; he feared them, too. This year *was* a first for the Tribe. Testament Day wasn't the only such memorial—and Yaru wasn't the only Korsin. Daughter Nida had reigned for a record seventy-nine years after her father, and her elevation to Grand Lord was commemorated with a monthlong festival on the grounds outside the palace every seventy-nine years. Even Hilts hadn't been around for the last one.

"Don't you see, Caretaker?" Abacus shells rattled as Jaye worked another calculation. "It's been one thousand nine hundred seventy-five years since Grand Lord Korsin transcended this existence and Nida succeeded him—and that's seventy-nine times twenty-five! This is the first time Testament Day and Nida's Rise have ever fallen in the same year!" Eyes darting to the side, he lowered his voice to a whisper. "The first time, *ever*."

"*Ever!*" Hilts clutched his pale purple companion by the shoulders in mock seriousness, causing Jaye to drop his counting frame to the stone floor. "So what you're telling me—is that we'll save on wine this time!" Hilts released Jaye and slapped his cheek lightly. "We don't need any more omens, Jaye. We've got one, up on the mountain, remember? And no one's allowed inside that."

Hilts walked toward his private office, leaving his aide to stare blankly at the abacus.

"But, Caretaker—"

"Overreacting, Jaye."

"But what about what I learned about the Sandpipes?"

"Don't start *that* again!" Hilts stepped into his office and looked with relief at his chair. Yes, that was the answer. After a morning like this, it would be a relief to sit in silence and drink some—

Voices rose outside in the atrium. Slamming his half-filled glass down to the desk in disgust, Hilts yelled over his shoulder at the commotion. "Jaye, I told you to quiet down!"

"That's funny," responded a husky female voice. "I just told him the same thing." Hilts turned to see a black-clad woman in her late twenties, holding a gleaming red lightsaber just beneath Jaye's neck. Golden eyes alive with dark intelligence, she spoke. "We have to talk, Caretaker—and I hate being interrupted."

She stood a full two meters, easily taller than Hilts. Bright red hair, neatly coiffed; flawless pink skin. She would have fared well in Seelah Korsin's inspections, centuries before, Hilts thought. And that was the whole point.

The intruder led Hilts back to the atrium, where he saw half a dozen similarly clad women, all perfect specimens of humanity themselves, threatening the huddled workers with lightsabers. She spoke again. "Of course, you know me."

"Only by reputation," he said, throat sandy. He'd never gotten to taste his drink. "I don't get out much."

"I can see that." The woman smiled primly and deactivated her lightsaber. "Iliana Merko. And these are my fellow Sisters of Seelah."

"I don't think Seelah Korsin had any sisters," Hilts said, regarding the beauties guarding his Keshiri.

"Sisters in spirit." Iliana strode confidently ahead, crushing Jaye's abacus underfoot as she did. The mathematician was with the others, now, prone on the floor but safe. Boot heels clacking against the marble, Iliana surveyed the glass statues lining the atrium. All depicted either Yaru or Nida Korsin. Iliana didn't look pleased.

"Sorry," Hilts said. "They took out the Seelah statues after—after what happened, years ago." He assumed she knew about the failed coup Seelah had plotted with Jariad against her husband, Yaru. To members of Iliana's faction, it was like yesterday. "I don't think they kept any Seelah pieces at all."

"I'm not surprised. No one gave our lady the respect she deserved. *She* founded the Tribe, you know—not these traitors." Glaring at a glass representation of Yaru Korsin, Iliana's expression melted to puzzlement. "Did he really look like *that*?"

“Back then, the Keshiri sculptors were still figuring out how to get human eyes right.” Hilts cautiously stepped toward her. The woman didn’t seem to be in any hurry, and he chose to think that boded well for his survival. But then, it wasn’t as if she was going to be interrupted. Who ever came *here*?

“You know why I’m here,” she said, facing him.

“The Testament won’t be read for twelve days yet. Why are you here *now*?”

She stepped briskly toward him. “We have to talk about what Korsin’s Testament says,” she said. “Before the others arrive.”

Hilts couldn’t help but laugh. “You *know* what the Testament says. Everyone does. It’s been transcribed so many times—”

Iliana charged forward, igniting her lightsaber and waving the tip just under the Caretaker’s hairy chin. “Of course we know! But this is different. This Testament Day, this reading—somehow, it’s become a *conclave*.”

His eyes narrowed. “*The Pantheon’s Peace*.”

“Exactly.”

It suddenly made sense to Hilts. For centuries, Testament Day and the reading had been the one time that the Tribe’s entire hierarchy met peaceably under one roof—that of the palace atrium—to hear their late founder’s words spoken. Even after the Sith splintered, deference to the great leaders of the past had been enough to bring the various faction leaders together at one time. No one dared make the meeting an opportunity for mayhem; some now regarded Korsin almost as a magical being, able to influence events from beyond the grave. Their forebears had walked in the stars.

“All my rivals will be here,” Iliana said, still threatening with the lightsaber. “Some believe that in the Testament, they’ll hear support for their cause—an endorsement from a dead man.” She looked back up at the statue and sneered. “Well, we all know what it *is*—a boring old speech rewarding his allies for helping him thwart Seelah.”

Hilts swallowed. No, Iliana and her allies wouldn’t find much to like in Korsin’s dying speech. The leader had only mentioned Seelah to banish her. Some of the other groups might find some support for their own claims to power in Korsin’s words—but the Sisters wouldn’t.

“That’s why, old man, I want you to *change* what’s in the Testament.” Iliana closed the remaining few footsteps between them and looked down on the Caretaker. She smiled. “Change it—to favor *us*.”

He held her gaze for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“Deadly.” Twirling, she stepped away, dousing her lightsaber again. “I know about you, Wilts—”

“That’s *Hilts*.”

“—you and your little workers here exist to dig up worthless trivia. Well,” she said, turning, “you’re going to reveal that you’ve discovered the *true* Testament—one declaring that Seelah and those who follow her teachings today are the legitimate heirs to power on Kesh.”

One of Iliana’s comrades produced a scroll and shoved it at Hilts. Unspooling it, he goggled. “I don’t think this will work.”

“Oh, it will,” Iliana said. “The others are superstitious—all invoking one figure from our history or another. They’re in awe of our ancestors born on high—and they’re right to be. But they don’t respect the one they should.” She gestured to the parchment in Hilts’s hands. “That’ll change when you read *that* instead of the Korsin Testament. The simpler-minded will believe it, and follow me. That should be enough.”

Hilts exhaled, barely stifling a laugh. He regarded the woman, so full of energy and cleverness—all spent to no avail whatsoever.

No, of course she wouldn’t know, he thought. *She’s too young.*

Iliana stared at him. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Hilts said, gesturing to the scroll. “I admire your initiative, Iliana Merko. But there’s a reason no one’s tried this before. You wouldn’t know, unless you’d been here for a Testament reading—or spoken with someone who was.”

“What in blazes are you talking about?”

Slowly so as not to cause alarm, Hilts stepped to the right of the Sandpipes and approached a covered pedestal. “You see, I don’t read Korsin’s Testament. The Caretakers never do.”

Iliana watched, puzzled, as he returned with something wrapped in rich fabric. “Then who reads it?”

“*Yaru Korsin* does.” Hilts pulled back the cloth, revealing a small pyramid-shaped object. A *device*—in a city that had none ...

Chapter Two

“This ... is *amazing*.”

“It’s not good, Caretaker.”

“I didn’t say it was,” Hilts responded to his aide. “But it’s still amazing.”

As Kesh’s sun cast its first rays onto the city, Hilts and Jaye looked down upon the palace grounds from the balcony. They’d never seen the city so alive. A writhing carpet of humans and Keshiri blanketed what had once been the Circle Eternal, with people setting up portable shelters for protection against volcanic rain.

Celebrants began gathering the day after Iliana and her warriors had entered the palace, all staking locations in preparation for the Festival of Nida’s Rise. None of the regular citizens would be allowed in for the Testament reading, but it didn’t seem to matter. “This is a planet that needs a party,” Hilts said.

“They want a leader,” Jaye responded. Dark eyes looked up at the Caretaker. “That’s what I heard Iliana saying. All the humans hope some guidance will come from the Grand Lord’s words.”

Hilts chortled. “Well, at least they’ll be *his* words.” He shot a glance back into the palace, where Iliana and her companions stared in stupefaction at the ornate pyramid. “They’ll never even figure out how to turn it on.” That much was true, Hilts remembered; he had barely gotten the thing working during the last Testament Day, twenty-five years earlier. His predecessor had described it as a recording device, and had passed to him the ancient secret for activating it—but it had taken four tries for Hilts to get it right on the appointed day. He wondered if something was wrong with it. Would it play this year?

No matter. *He* had played the last four days pretty well, Hilts thought. To buy time, he’d lied to Iliana that the device only activated on Testament Day. That hadn’t stopped the arrogant woman from fiddling with it, to no avail—but the ploy had brought the relief he’d hoped for. Along with the revelers, Iliana’s rivals had entered Tahv far ahead of schedule, evidently attracted by their spies’ reports that the Sisters of Seelah had taken the palace. Now, out there in the encampments flew the banners of the Korsinites, the Golden Destiny, Force 57, and countless other factions. Seelah’s vanguard had taken station outside the palace entrance, but it wasn’t clear how long they could bar entry with their opponents’ numbers growing. With eight days remaining before Testament Day, the blood enemies had held off on violence, instead using the mass public gathering as a chance to proselytize. Nida’s Rise had become a festival of blather.

“Looking for a leader in this bunch,” Hilts said, “may the dark side help us all.”

“The conjunction,” Jaye said. Hilts was afraid he was about to hear another round about Jaye’s theory, and what today really was, when the Keshiri sighed and looked directly at him. “Caretaker, I’ll never understand why *you* never challenged to rule the Tribe. You’re wiser in the ways of the ancient Protectors than anyone.”

“*Too* wise,” Hilts said, amused. “These are the days of the Flagrant Fool, my friend. Knowledgeable men like us can’t get far.”

“But the Tribe teaches that every free man or woman can grow up to become Grand Lord.”

“Which is a fine thing for *me* to believe,” Hilts said. “But if *you* believe it, it isn’t as fine. And if those fools out there believe it as well,” he continued, gesturing to the crowd, “it becomes a horrible thing. Your opportunity lies in my failure.” He smirked. “And what’s this ‘Tribe teaches’? No one agrees

on what the Tribe is even *about* anymore.” The schooling system had been just another victim of the upheaval. Under Korsin and his successors, people had worked together. But as individuals increasingly sought shortcuts to sole power, Sith society—if it could be called that—had fallen apart. Hilts clapped his hand on the young aide’s shoulder. “No, it’s too late. Like Donellan, time has passed me by.”

“I don’t agree—”

“Listen, Jaye. When a man of advancing years tells you something is true, either believe him, or nod politely,” Hilts said, stepping away from the railing. “The last thing you want to do is shake his faith in his omniscience.”

“Even if he’s wrong?”

“*Especially* if he’s wrong.” He turned to step back inside the palace. “And speaking of fools ...”

Inside, Iliana continued to paw at the little pyramid. Only two of her companions remained, the rest having departed to guard the entrance.

“If it’s some kind of recording device,” Iliana said, “it must have a power source. Perhaps a Lignan crystal.”

“If you find out how it works,” Hilts said, “you’ll be one for the historical records yourself.” He crossed to an unthreatening position near the Sandpipes. After locking his workers in another room, Iliana had kept the Caretaker and his assistant in the immediate area, ready to answer questions. Hilts wasn’t going anywhere, anyway. The whole thing had become an amusing spectacle—and the players, fun to watch.

He’d found Iliana a fetching woman, if completely venal and untrustworthy. Hilts had never taken a mate, partially because of his dead-end station, but also because he knew that Sith didn’t know how to share. He’d seen it in the histories time and again: all that envy and plotting, even within families. No wonder Yaru Korsin had decreed that the consorts of expired Grand Lords needed to be put to death. Poison had no place in the bedchamber.

Not that Iliana knew it. Now, as she had once the day before, Iliana stepped toward him and looked into his eyes with sudden warmth. “Caretaker, are you *sure* there’s no way to see the recording now—to alter it?” Her gloved hand brushed gently against his arm.

“Gloyd’s blood, girl! I’m twice your age, at least,” Hilts said. He looked at her with incredulity. “You *are* a Sister of Seelah.”

Glaring, she shrank back. “And you’re a festering old wart!”

"*That's* more like it. Can we get down to facts now? Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to doctor the message on here. And I don't want to!" He turned away from her and gestured to the paintings on the atrium walls, depicting the arrival of the travelers from the skies. "This gadget is our only functioning link to that past, to how we came to be. I wouldn't tamper with it if my life depended on it."

"How about someone else's?"

Hilts heard the sharp hiss of Iliana's lightsaber being activated. Turning cautiously, he saw that her companions had taken Jaye by the arms. "Now, there's no need for that."

"I think there is. Start taking apart the device, Caretaker. And while you do," Iliana said, "we're going to take this Keshiri apart. There might be something of him left, if you work fast enough."

Hilts's eyes alternated between his writhing, panicked assistant and the gleaming widget. He didn't even know where to begin, but he had to do something. Reluctantly, he took the small pyramid in hand—

—and nearly dropped it when several figures crashed through the glass windows above, plummeting into the atrium. Dressed in the ancient uvak-leather garb of the Skyborn Rangers, the new arrivals hit the marble surface behind Jaye's captors and ignited their lightsabers. At the same time, several of Iliana's warriors from outside entered, retreating from the charge of a grisly-looking mob of misanthropes. Her weapon already drawn, Iliana sprang to her allies' defense, releasing Jaye, who dived for the floor near Hilts's feet.

"Now, boy!" Holding his aide's tunic in one hand and the recorder in the other, Hilts tumbled toward the Sandpipes, away from the fray. Behind them, crimson energy crackled, tearing into Sith flesh. There were *two* groups of assailants after Iliana, he realized.

Recognizing who they were, Hilts understood what he had to do.

"Human trash!" Iliana screamed with fury as she locked lightsabers with a scarred behemoth of a woman. "Traitorous wench!" yelled a bald mountain of male anger, one of the leather-armored arrivals from above. Clashing, the combatants seemed as interested in insulting their enemies as striking them. So much so that in between blows, they chanced to hear—

"*Hey! Up here!*"

Heads turned to the glass contraption towering near the north wall. The rumpled Hilts clung to the maintenance ladder by the Sandpipes, with a

terrified Jaye on the rungs just beneath. Holding the recording device in one hand, the Caretaker swallowed hard and spoke.

“Factions of Kesh—*invited guests*—welcome. Um ... you’re all early.”

Chapter Three

They just had to knock out the windows, Hilts thought. Thirty years he'd spent trying to keep his portion of the capitol building from falling apart. The warring oafs had just set him and his staff back another thirty years—provided he survived the afternoon.

“I have to say I'm surprised to see you all here,” Hilts said, stepping over shards to the center of the room. The warriors had stepped back from one another but still held their lightsabers before them, leaving a wedge of space in between for him and Jaye. “It's eight days until Testament Day. But this *is* a palace. I guess we have some extra rooms here for you—”

“Shut up, old man!” The beefy black-haired woman with all the scars took a step forward and pointed at Iliana. “We want to know why *she's* here!”

Hilts looked to see Iliana and her companions, some bloodied from the battle, backed up against the Sandpipes, ready for their last stand. Iliana's face flashed with defiance. “Don't answer that cretin, Hilts!”

“Don't *you* raise your voice in this place, woman!” The hulking bald man with a black mustache stepped forth from his leather-clad coterie and made

an unkind gesture to Iliana. “The house of Korsin was no place for Seelah—and no place for you!”

Seeing the line of warriors behind Iliana poised to move, Hilts quickly stepped between them and the giant. “You—you’re Korsinite League, right?”

“I am Korsin Bentado,” the shiny-headed man said, his deep voice thundering in the chamber. He gestured to either side. “This is Korsin Vandoz, and you know Korsin Immera from the last Testament reading. We’ve come, Caretaker, to celebrate the lives of Yaru and Nida Korsin at this grand and celestial time. We hope that all is ready—”

“Well, it will—”

“—and we hope that you can show the *mised* among us the truth of the Testament. That the leader came from beyond, that the Tribe is the body of the leader, and that those who would imperil the body deserve neither mercy nor life,” Bentado said. He gazed reverentially at the statue Iliana had once mocked and bowed his head. “One becomes all, and all one. Korsin now, Korsin forever.”

“Whatever you say,” Hilts said. Turning, he shot a surreptitious look at Jaye and shook his head. Hilts knew these people well. A former slave had founded the Korsinite League a century earlier, taking *Korsin* as a title for himself, separate from the hierarchy of Lords. Emancipated, he patterned his life after those led by the first Grand Lord and his successor daughter; as he declared, any worthy could aspire to Korsin-ness, just as he had. His followers took it to heart—and, being Sith, decided *they* could just as easily adopt the title for themselves. Which they all did, over the movement founder’s complaints—and, eventually, his dead body. Now there were hundreds of self-named Korsins of either sex running about, chanting mantras and declaring their empires of one to the crowd at large. To strike up a conversation with a Korsinite was to risk death by cognitive dissonance.

“I still want to know why that—that *woman* has been allowed in here!” The scar-faced female slapped a bare hand on Hilts’s shoulder and twirled him around. Hilts realized with a start that the hand had only three webbed fingers.

“You’re Force Fifty-seven, I take it.”

“Obviously!” Her companions jostled behind her, growling ferally. The woman Neera was in fact the least gruesome of the bunch, Hilts saw. No one knew much about the original 57; Seelah Korsin had evidently taken

steps to erase that faction's existence from memory. But the Keshiri tales spoke of those early *Omen* crew members as deformed in some way, the opposite of Seelah's perfect human specimens.

The modern Force 57 was far more than fifty-seven in number; looking at Neera's allies, Hilts wondered if every misshapen human living on Kesh had found his or her way into the ranks. They were easy to pick out when they ventured near the capital; even those least blemished by birth had dozens of self-inflicted scars. Fifty-seven, Hilts imagined, although he had never had the opportunity or desire to count.

"Seelah banished our kind, so she could have her blissful perfection," Neera yelled, gesturing to the walls. "This place is disgusting! You see who's missing from these paintings, don't you? Where's Ravilan, the leader of the Different Ones? Why, they don't even bother to show Gloyd—the one the Korsins let live, like a pet!" She spat on the marble. "Your precious Pantheon is missing members!"

"You are, too!" Iliana shot back. "Seelah was right to purge the defectives! And we're going to do it again!" The Sisters surged forward—only to be blocked by Hilts.

"People, people!" Looking back, Hilts saw that his triangle of neutral ground had shrunk. "This isn't the place for this!"

"You're absolutely right, Caretaker," Korsin Bentado said, tightening the fasteners on his lightsaber hand's glove. "The defilers must pay the penalty. We will finish this battle here and now—and then outside, where the other factions are gathered. The blood will sanctify this place. The Korsinite League will be triumphant—and in eight days, we alone will hear Yaru Korsin's blessings."

Cowering near his master, Jaye squeaked. "But there are thousands of people out there!"

"If that's how it has to be."

"It doesn't *have* to be this way!" Hilts yelled. Remembering the recording device, he raised it into the air. "You're here for the reading. We could do it now!"

Iliana glared at him. "You said it only activated on Testament Day!"

Hilts looked back at her and shrugged. "I'm Sith. I lied."

"The League will not accept a reading of the Testament on any day besides the anniversary," Bentado said, golden eyes glaring under bushy black brows. "Would you be branded a heretic, Caretaker, like these others?"

The line began to move again behind him. “We’ll hear the founder in eight days—*alone!*”

Seeing the combatants surge forward, Hilts felt Jaye clinging tightly to him. In a flash he made a connection.

Eight days.

“Jaye! Your calculations!” Pulling the Keshiri’s head from his chest, Hilts yelled urgently. “Your calculations about the Sandpipes!”

The aide looked up, tears of panic flowing freely. “Now? But you said no one would be interested in—”

“Now, Jaye!” he rasped. “*Tell them!*”

Quaking in terror, the little Keshiri released his master and addressed the assemblage. “Begging your Lordships’ pardons—”

“We’re not all Lords, Keshiri!”

Jaye nearly fell over at Neera’s response. His humongous black eyes darted back to Hilts, who mouthed urgently: *Say it!*

“Begging your pardons, but when the Protectors landed, they brought their Standard Calendar, which we Keshiri adopted, regardless of our different length of day and year—”

Another lightsaber ignited in the crowd.

“—and we calibrated our Sandpipes to your magical chrono, aboard *Omen*. When the mountain temple was sealed and *Omen* abandoned, bearers brought the Sandpipes here, still keeping time—”

Two more lightsabers, and more movement.

“—but we found years ago that the sand didn’t flow through the pipes at the same speed on the mainland as up on the mountain.” Red energy shining in his face, Jaye swallowed. “It runs slower.”

Bentado raised his weapon—and an eyebrow. “How much slower?”

“One second slower,” Jaye said, voice creaking. “Your Standard Day is really a second shorter than what we’ve been using all this time.”

Neera and the 57s rumbled with impatience. “What the blazes difference does that make?”

Hilts clenched his fists and looked at Jaye. “*Tell them!*”

“Over two thousand years? It makes *eight days’ difference*. Which means—”

“Which means,” Hilts said, stepping beside his quivering aide, “that by our founders’ true timekeeping, Testament Day is *today*. And the Festival of Nida’s Rise really begins today, as well.” He looked to Iliana and lowered his voice. “But Yaru’s day is the important one.”

Bentado stomped toward the pair and raged. “This is preposterous!” He grabbed Jaye by the wrist. “You’re telling me this Keshiri fool counted all the seconds since practically when *Omen* landed? That must be ten million—”

“The word in your language is *billion*,” Jaye croaked. “And it’s more than sixty.”

Iliana stepped forward—and lowered her lightsaber. “He’s telling the truth,” she said. “I don’t see any deception in him. Nor much of anything else.”

Bentado turned back to his allies, who nodded in silence. Even the wretched 57s had paused.

Hilts looked at the Keshiri and marveled. *Well done. Now shut up!*

“The reading is on,” Hilts said. “I declare the Pantheon’s Peace.” Holding the recording device aloft, he looked from one of the faction leaders to another. “Deactivate your weapons—and call in any of your rival leaders from outside,” he said. “I can’t tell you people how to run your affairs. Maybe Yaru Korsin can.”

Chapter Four

“... when we landed, we were few. Our survival was not guaranteed. The Tribe—what we have become—was the necessary mechanism. Once we knew Kesh held no dangers for us, the only threat came from ourselves ...”

The starship captain sat in his command chair, facing death—and, unbeknownst to him, several of his remote descendants, separated by time. The image of Yaru Korsin flickered in midair, casting eerie shadows through the darkened atrium. It was neither the robust Korsin of the later paintings nor the bug-eyed deity of the Keshiri sculpture who appeared; it was simply a man. A spent warrior-king, clutching his chest and speaking his last.

“... and just as I had you trained in secret, Nida, there are secrets you must always keep. The true power is behind the throne. Should disaster befall—remember that ...”

Platitudes passed from a ruler to his child, both long dead. Hilts had studied the words for so many years, they had lost their magic for him. True, that first sight long ago of Yaru Korsin, animated, had excited his imagination. But this time it was different. Standing behind the device and its projection, he found himself looking not at the ancient figure, but through him, at the gathered listeners. The atrium had been cleared of dead

bodies and living warriors that afternoon; now, as darkness fell, only the faction leaders remained, including a dozen-plus brought in from outside. Hilts searched from face to face. Some had that same look of wonder he'd once had; humility was a new concept for most Sith. Others seemed untouched.

Hilts focused again on Korsin. He'd been dying when he recorded this; bleeding in the seat that had once been the captain's chair from *Omen*, he'd hurriedly recorded a message to his daughter, who was busy finishing off the rebels elsewhere on the mountain. Between coughs, the spectral Korsin spoke of the Tribe's hierarchy, and how the structure should be managed to prevent uprisings like the one that ultimately killed him. He'd just spoken the segment about killing dead Grand Lord's spouses and banishing Seelah; Hilts could still feel the rage coming from Iliana.

"... that should hold the Tribe for the long term, but you'll want to begin bringing your own people in at the Lord level. I have a few suggestions, depending on who survives ..."

"This is the boring part," Iliana snapped. Hilts looked to his shoes. She was right. For all the regard placed on the document, he knew it included a lot of logistical detail. Several of the leaders paid rapt attention, listening to Korsin speak of their adopted intellectual forebears, but for the others it was tedium.

Looking at the restive members, Hilts wondered about his next move. He was alone now; Jaye had been kicked outside along with his fellow workers before the reading began. That was good for them, for the moment. But the Pantheon's Peace would conclude when the recording did—and it didn't look like the words were leading any toward a settlement. How could he stay alive—much less protect his staff and position—if this solved nothing? *Never mind the Tribe's future*, Hilts thought. *What about mine?*

After several minutes, Korsin's speech slowed. The mortal wound taking its toll, the words turned personal. Hilts looked up again, newly fascinated by the momentary connection with a man two thousand years old.

"... Nida, my daughter, you're more than the only good thing to come from Seelah. You're the future of the Sith on this planet. It wasn't ... our choice to live here. But it is ... our choice not to die here. That choice ... will be made by you ..."

Korsin slumped in his chair. The image froze.

"Is that all?" Iliana said.

Hilts looked at her, unsurprised that she'd won the race to speak first. "That's all." He stepped to the recording device.

"It's enough," Korsin Bentado said reverently. "You've just heard a great leader say it. There can only be one power structure—the one *he* invented. The one my people will represent. No compromise."

"You're wrong," came another voice. Hilts saw it belonged to the leader of the Golden Destiny, a group obsessed with the stellar aspects of the Tribe's origin. "I heard a great conqueror describe a powerful people. We didn't even intend to come here—yet we subdued this world instantly. Every human in the galaxy likely has his own planetary kingdom! We must stop fighting, reopen the temple, and return to the stars!"

Hilts shook his head as the quarrels began anew. There were no lightsabers, yet; the leaders were too busy telling one another what they had just all heard. But it was only a matter of time. He absently fiddled with the recorder. He'd gotten it started more easily this time, but for some reason it wasn't deactivating properly.

Static appeared—and then something else. Fleeting images, interlaced with the scene of the expired Grand Lord.

"There's something here," Hilts said, adjusting the device. "Underneath."

Apalimpsest. He'd heard Keshiri artists speak of the concept. Occasionally, a second work was painted over an earlier version, using the same canvas. The concept had no meaning in sculpture—and wasn't the projected image a living sculpture? But still, *something* was there. Maybe when Korsin used the device to record his message, there had already been another one on it!

He rattled the few controls he understood again ...

... and a monster appeared.

"This is your liege, Naga Sadow, speaking to the captain Yaru Korsin!"

The leaders turned instantly from their arguments on hearing the gravelly voice. It belonged to something not entirely human, clad in the robes of a Sith ruler. Sadow's face had a reddish cast, terminating in two pointed tentacles that writhed when he spoke. Veins bulged from his bald cranium like mountain ranges.

And as he spoke, he gestured with hands—such hands!—tipped with talons an uvak might have.

Neera of Force 57 spoke first. "What—is that *thing*?"

"Alongside Saes and the Harbinger, you are decreed to deliver the mining team belonging to your sibling, Devore, to Phaegon. You will obtain Lignan crystals for my cause and return to Kirrek."

Hilts had to rub his eyes. The language was theirs, if heavily accented. But what was speaking it? Aside from the Keshiri, there was no record of there being any other sentient species in the universe.

And certainly not one that gave orders to humans.

"For this mission, I dispatch to you one you have worked with before, Ravilan Wroth, and his Massassi warriors."

The image changed—and if the visage of Naga Sadow startled the viewers, the appearance of the one called Ravilan and his escort evoked audible gasps. His skin fully crimson, Ravilan looked even less human than Sadow, with protruding eyebrow stalks to go along with even longer facial tendrils. And the lumbering blood-colored monstrosities standing behind Ravilan were grotesque beyond description.

The image flickered, and Naga Sadow reappeared.

"I have sent for your brother, Devore, to inform him that you will be in charge. But remember that you are all subject to my law and whim. You may have more freedom of action than other Sith allow their slaves—but the greatest thing your kind can aspire to is competence in my service. And that is what I demand of you. Your work will create my glory. Begin your preparations. Succeed in my name. Fail me—and die."

The image vanished, leaving the atrium in near-darkness. Starlight filtered in through the broken windows above.

Finally, Iliana spoke. "What was *that*?"

"A message," Hilts said, cautiously fingering the device. "An earlier message. I think that Korsin recorded over it—that we weren't supposed to see it." The gadget had been testy in recent activations. Maybe it had finally failed to do what Korsin intended. He exhaled and looked up to the skylights. "I think that was, as he said, Naga Sadow."

The crowd erupted in disbelief, voiced loudest by Korsin Bentado. "Naga Sadow is just a name from folk tales—'Korsin's celestial ally.' That—that *thing* acted like it owned the *Omen*. And the crew!"

"They weren't conquerors," Iliana said acidly. "They were diggers in the dirt. And the great Yaru Korsin was just a delivery boy!"

The gruesome outcasts of Force 57 seemed the most horrified of all, having seen the true face of Ravilan and his outcasts. "This—this is not Sith," Neera said, almost in a whisper. "This is *madness*."

Hilts was speechless. All the little mysteries from their history and all the redacted sections of texts suddenly made sense, if this could be called sense. Yaru Korsin and the entire founding pantheon had been slaves—to that *thing*?

“No wonder Seelah Korsin wanted us all to be pure specimens,” Iliana said, standing before the others. “She was *sanctifying* the race.”

Korsin Bentado was pacing. “No, it can’t be. It can’t be.” He glared at Hilts. “You! Caretaker! The Sisters got to you earlier. Did you tamper with that?”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin,” Hilts said. He lifted the projector from the floor and placed it back on its pedestal.

“Then ... what does this mean?”

“It means we’re not just the Tribe,” Hilts said. “We’re a *Lost* Tribe.” He nearly spat the adjective. It was nothing to be proud of. “We’re missing. We didn’t come on our own; we were sent, and not sent here. But once we crashed, Korsin stayed—because he didn’t want to go back and face *that*.”

The murmurs grew louder. Who would blame Korsin? But that made them all something terrible indeed.

Runaway slaves.

In a flash, Iliana ignited her lightsaber and lunged. Hilts stumbled, certain she was coming for him. Instead, her weapon found its home in the recording device, bisecting it and the pedestal it sat upon.

Hilts fumbled toward the sparking halves of the gadget. “What did you do *that* for?”

“We can’t let anyone know,” Iliana said to the others, her voice grave. “They never wanted us to know. Seelah must have forbidden any records of what Ravilan’s people really were. It’s why Korsin recorded over the message. We have to keep this secret.”

Hilts looked up at her. “I don’t see how—”

“We can’t ever let the Keshiri know!” Korsin Bentado said, the stoic giant now Jaye’s equal for nervousness. “If they find out their Protectors could be ruled by creatures like that—”

“They won’t,” Neera hissed. “I’ll kill them all first.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Iliana said, grinding the fragments of the recorder with her boot. “It’s done.”

Hilts looked at the remains. It was.

It had gone predictably wrong. Twenty Sith couldn't share a secret, not even for their own protection. Someone had told the tale. Perhaps one of the attendees, anguished and full of drink, had revealed all about the Lost Tribe's origins. Certainly, many of the leaders' comrades would have been anxious for news about what had transpired during the reading. And there, camped outside, were humans from all over Kesh, celebrating the Festival of Nida's Rise. Humans with uvak, ready to fly and deliver the dire news.

They weren't special.

The result was swiftly seen. The cities of Kesh had been crumbling. Now they burned. All of them, from what little word had come in from the rest of the continent. Today was the regularly scheduled Testament Day. It had taken only eight days for the cancerous truth to reach every place humans lived.

They weren't anything.

Hilts peered out onto the nighttime streets from Jaye's hejarbo-shoot hut. The dwelling had survived the first firestorm, but the arsonists were in motion again, and it likely wouldn't be around for long. Everywhere, Keshiri watched from hiding, both fearing for their lives and fascinated by the convulsions their masters were putting themselves through. Anger flowed freely as an entire race tried to commit suicide.

They didn't deserve to be anything.

"This is the end of times, Master Hilts," Jaye said, huddling beside him in the doorway. The frightened Keshiri looked up at the cloud of crazed uvak, circling the flames.

Hilts simply nodded. He'd told his aide about the contents of the recording. It didn't really matter, now. The human population of Kesh was already down to a few thousand from all the infighting. How many could be left? He hadn't seen any of the faction leaders since the riots broke out—not even Iliana, who'd seemed confident the danger was past. How wrong she was. It wouldn't be long now.

And yet ...

... Korsin had said something else. "*The true power is behind the throne,*" he had said. It was a strange statement. Hilts had heard of a Keshiri idiom where that referred to the contributions of a spouse. But the husband of Seelah couldn't mean that. He'd met Iliana, her spiritual descendant. Hilts wouldn't have trusted her not to rob his corpse. No Sith trusted a lover—least of all one like Seelah.

Hilts stood in the doorway.

“Caretaker, the rioters will see you!”

The gray-haired human paid no mind, looking, instead, up toward the palace. They’d evacuated when the mob turned ugly. But it wasn’t what was there that was on his mind now. It was what had never been there.

A throne.

Cape billowing behind him, Hilts bolted into the street. Alarmed, Jaye followed, careful not to step on—or look at—any of his dead neighbors.

“Caretaker, what is it?”

“It’s the throne, Jaye. The throne!”

The Keshiri knew the term. Elders in the Neshtovar used to fashion them for themselves. “But Korsin had no throne.”

“Not in the palace, my boy. Look!” Grabbing his aide’s shoulders, he pointed the Keshiri to the west—and the cloud-enshrouded peaks of the Takara Mountains. Suddenly rejuvenated, Hilts recited the lines he’d memorized decades earlier. *“There are secrets you must always keep. The true power is behind the throne. Should disaster befall—remember that!”* Squinting through the smoke, he looked at the forbidden place. “Korsin’s throne was his seat from *Omen*—and that’s up there!”

“I—I don’t understand,” Jaye stammered.

“We weren’t meant to see the message from Sadow—but that’s not Yaru Korsin’s legacy. There’s something else—something he mentioned in the Testament. Something that might save the Tribe from itself!”

Hilts breathed deeply, as excited as he had been in years. For his entire life, he thought he’d known all the history there was, all that Korsin had to say. Could he really have left ... *a postscript?*

“There’s only one thing to do,” Hilts said, cinching up his cape and walking confidently into the chaos. “We’re going to unseal the temple. We’re going aboard *Omen*!”

Secrets

Chapter One

3000 BBY

Like all Sith on Kesh during the Time of the Rot, the Hilts family had ambition. It was just never very big on execution.

Varner Hilts's father spent years earning the confidence of the leader of his local faction. He took great care in selecting the shikkar blade intended for his liege's back. But the elder Hilts used somewhat less care in fastening the dagger's sheath, and the glass blade fell from his belt and buried itself in his ankle. He was dead in a gangrenous month, a mercifully short time to have to endure the nickname "Slippery Hilts."

Unfazed, the widow Hilts soldiered on, targeting the faction leader for seduction the very next week. Minions carefully delivered her to the leader's private bedchambers in a massive ceremonial urn. Unfortunately, the lid was stubborn, and no one had told her the leader was spending the month campaigning in the high country. However, she did achieve her surprise, if the horror of the cleaning servants counted.

Varner Hilts had lived longer than either of them, rising quietly—if inoffensively—to a position of responsibility within the Tribe. He'd worked every day in the greatest palace on the mainland—and had viewed Yaru

Korsin's Testament not once, but twice. He'd ventured closer than anyone had in years to the Temple that held *Omen*, the ship that had brought Korsin and the Lost Tribe to Kesh.

And now he was about to be killed by a plant.

"Jaye! Jaye!" Hilts called, struggling upside down within a thorny web of vines. Every motion caused the bonds to tighten around the old man's limbs. He spotted his assistant looking down at him from atop the green-tressed stonework. "Jaye, cut me down!"

Black eyes blinked. "With what, Caretaker?"

"With anything!"

"Oh!" The purple-faced Keshiri vanished for a moment before reappearing with his satchel. "The lightsaber you found!"

"Whoa, no!" Hilts flared the fingers of his free hand in panic. Predictably, Jaye was holding the weapon by the wrong end. "You'll kill yourself turning it on!"

Jaye knelt closer to where Hilts was dangling. "Should I pass it down to you, then?"

"No. Look, go find a sharp rock," Hilts said, settling as best he could in his knotty prison. "I'll just ... hang around here."

Hilts listened to the Keshiri skitter off and cursed himself for his wild scheme. No one had dared approach the mountain Temple in centuries—and now a sixty-year-old archivist and his cowardly clerk would do it? During a week, no less, when every settlement on the continent of Keshtah roiled with riotous convulsions? Hilts shook his head, ignoring the scratches from the vine wrapped beneath his chin. He'd been mad to make the journey!

And the journey had been maddening. Hilts had returned first to his museum in the capital city of Tahv, where he'd long preserved the ancient maps of *Omen*'s Temple. But pillagers had struck the palace, burning every scrap of parchment in the archives. Everything breakable had been broken. The sight of the smashed Sandpipes had driven Jaye to tears.

Hilts had been prepared for that. The self-destructive rampage had been going nonstop since the Tribe's discovery that their ancestors hadn't been conquerors, but slaves to aliens. Nonetheless, the sight of so many human corpses lying in the streets had unnerved him. No Sith saw any single life as precious, but their species as a whole certainly was. The survivors of *Omen*

had been so few in number in the beginning. How many generations' increase had been lost? Could they ever recover?

The forbidden Temple might hold the solution—but Hilts had to get there first, avoiding the roving bands of Sith thugs on killing sprees. It was why he'd brought Jaye along. Keshiri families that once worshipped humans now feared them; none would have granted him shelter. But any Sith who would travel with meek Jaye Vuhld was probably not someone on a murderous rampage. They'd taken refuge in Keshiri shacks in daylight hours, making their way west at night.

The journey was long, but necessary: the Temple sat atop the Takara Mountains at the northern tip of a long peninsula running parallel to the mainland. It would have been a short hop over the inlet for an uvak—but nothing could get Hilts onto the back of one of the flying beasts. They'd taken the long way along the southern coast before turning up the hostile spit of land. There was no shelter here, nor sustenance; just as well, as Hilts had tasted only his own stomach acid since the riots began. Finally, they'd arrived at the base of The Blocks, massive granite barriers lodged in a narrow pass by Nida Korsin to prevent anyone from accessing the forbidden heights on foot. With each cube ten meters tall, they gave the impression of a staircase for the gods—a formidable obstacle, indeed. But sometime in the intervening centuries, a hardy foliage had taken root in the stones' crevices—strong vines, providing a way up.

Or a way to hang upside down until you hemorrhage and die, Hilts thought. He looked up. Where was that blasted Keshiri?

A light flashed in the sky. Weary eyes focused. A reflection? But from what?

“Here, Caretaker!”

No sooner did Hilts hear the squeaky voice than he felt a violent tug, and then he was being dragged up the side of The Blocks by his legs. “Jaye! What are you doing?”

The Keshiri groaned, pulling on a clutch of vines wrapped around his spindly fingers. Hilts righted himself and clambered atop the barrier, where he spent a full minute gasping for breath. Rolling over, he saw Jaye had found a series of postholes in the stone surface. The base for some scaffold centuries earlier, each hole was large enough to accommodate a Keshiri foot, allowing the frail clerk some mechanical advantage as he hauled his master up the side.

"This ... is the last barrier," Jaye said, wiping blood from his palms and looking behind them. A modest scramble-down led to an open trail up the gorge—and to the Temple mountain, farther above.

But Hilts's attention was higher still. "Look there!" In the eastern sky, an uvak beat its wings as it arced downward toward the Temple. Hilts squinted. There was a rider aboard. Another flash of light—a reflection, like before. On metal-poor Kesh, that usually meant one thing: the handle of a lightsaber.

Hilts frowned and looked toward the Temple. "We'd better get going." Standing, he pulled the remaining shreds of vine from his portly frame. With renewed purpose, he took a step forward—

—directly into a posthole.

"Caretaker!"

The granite felt cool on Hilts's face. "I've decided, Jaye ... that first ... we're going to rest here ... for a while ..."

The Keshiri didn't argue.

"You must finish the job of removing the Tribe from this mountain. Our destiny, for now, lies in ruling the part of Kesh that lives ..."

So Yaru Korsin had instructed his daughter in the Testament, and his decree had been followed. Followed, and respected, by a people that respected nothing. Hilts marveled as he stepped from the rocky path onto the windswept stone of the site. Sith would look for any edge they could find in their squabbles, yet none had ever returned here, to his knowledge. It could have been superstition, but Hilts thought it more likely that they understood the futility of returning. What advantage could be found here that Korsin and the other passengers of *Omen* wouldn't already have taken?

And yet, that was his quest. Thousands of meters below, all across the continent to the east, his civilization was in the process of expunging itself. Twenty warring factions had already destroyed the Sith state. But the revelation of their common—and lowly—origin had left every human soul detached and despondent. A thousand-year sclerosis could be survived, but not another week of self-mutilation.

What can I find here that no one else has? Hilts wondered anew as he looked to the twin spires flanking the royal residence far ahead. Vanity had led him to this, surely. But maybe it wasn't such a crazy dream. Anyone else would have looked here for a weapon, some ancient technology from the stars.

Hilts was looking for a message. Something Korsin had hinted at in his dying words, something that could lead the Tribe back onto a singular path. *"The true power is behind the throne,"* Korsin had said. *"Should disaster befall—remember that ..."*

Jaye stepped fearfully onto the southern terrace of the holy place. Shabby stone buildings lined the sides, worn down by wind, sun, and neglect. "It's bigger than I imagined, Caretaker."

"That's fine," Hilts said, ignoring his sore ankle as he strode confidently ahead. "I know where we are."

And he did. He didn't have the maps now, but they'd been with him for years. He'd committed to memory this lower terrace, where the service personnel had lived. North past the uvak stables were the steps to the middle terrace, with its training academy, dormitories, storehouses, and wardroom. Up more stairs would be the outdoor colonnade where Yaru Korsin had held his public court. Then, finally, the quadrangle of the main plaza, formed by the royal residence to the west, the watchtower and guardhouse to the east, and the Temple dome to the north. Part of the upper plaza actually sat atop *Omen's* honored place of rest; the structure had been built around and atop the damaged ship, to protect it.

Just thinking about *Omen* brought more spring to Hilts's step. He didn't even blanch when he saw the multitude of stairs to the middle terrace. Anyone looking at the edifice from afar would assume it had been built by a culture that loved climbing.

Indeed, it had been.

"Come on, my boy," Hilts said. "Keep up the pace."

* * *

The body was freshly killed. One quick, inartful slash to the throat had been the end of the uvak. Hilts studied the smelly beast baking in the noon sun. It surely was the creature he'd seen approaching—slain here, right in the middle of the terrace.

"I guess the stables didn't suit our visitor," Hilts said.

Jaye cowered behind him. "Do ... do you want the weapon?"

Hilts looked around, feeling through the Force. Something was here. "Yes," he said. "Give it to me."

Jaye fumbled through the knapsack and produced the lightsaber. Hilts hadn't owned one as Caretaker—what was the point?—but on their way out

of Tahv, he'd pilfered one from the corpse of a massive warrior. He never knew what he might need.

"Do you know how to use it?" Jaye asked.

"Sure. Just get them to stand right in front of me, and I'll turn it on."

Levity didn't lift the unease. Hilts wasn't practiced in the use of the Force for defense, either. He'd had the same training as a boy that other Tribe members had, but apart from deflecting chunks of falling aqueduct, he'd had little use for the Force's physical manifestations in recent decades.

Still, he knew a bad feeling when he felt it—and this wasn't more acid in his throat. In fact, he recognized this particular sting ...

"The wardroom," Hilts said, sensing the source of the twinge up ahead. "Stay outside. If you hear trouble, run and never return."

There may have been no statues of Seelah Korsin in the palace in Tahv, but the figure in the bas-relief carved outside the hospital was unmistakable. As Yaru Korsin's wife, Seelah was the Mother of the Tribe; but before that, she'd been Devore Korsin's wife, and the mother of a traitor. Hilts had never seen Seelah in any depictions, but looking at the smooth skin, the coiffed hair, and the perfect figure in the marble, he knew he'd seen her twin—and recently.

"Iliana Merko," he called, stepping through the doorway. "It's Caretaker Hilts. I know you're here. I think we should talk."

Chapter Two

“Iliana? Iliana?”

Hilts gaped as he saw the figure in the shadows. The last two weeks had been hard on everyone on Kesh, but he barely recognized the leader of the Sisters of Seelah. Iliana sat huddled in the cold corner of the dark storeroom, gently caressing a skull.

She sobbed gently, not registering his presence. Hilts looked back nervously to the outer room and its rows of marbled surgical tables—and then down to the lightsaber in his hand. He clipped it back to his belt. Iliana Merko was a dangerous faction leader, but the figure before him was something else. Her once-bright hair was dirty and tangled; her once-flawless skin was smudged with dirt and blood—and amazingly, with something he’d never thought he’d see on her face: tears.

“She died here,” Iliana said, bringing the skull to her forehead. “Alone.”

Hilts looked down. Here in the cool darkness, some portion of a skeleton had survived, clumped in a corner. Realizing who the skull belonged to, he spoke cautiously. “How do you know it’s Seelah?”

"I know," Iliana whispered. Opening her gloved hand, she revealed a ring bearing the Korsin family seal. A Tapani commitment band.

"They just left her here," Hilts said, kneeling to look at the remains. The femurs appeared whole, but only tiny shards remained of the bones beneath. Time hadn't done this, he thought—and as he noticed the cane nearby, history fell into place. He'd known that Seelah's betrayal had been exposed, and that Nida Korsin had punished her mother. But the records never said whether it was exile or death. Now The Blocks down below made sense. The barrier would keep a crippled Seelah here as much as it kept others out. "Exile," he said quietly.

"She was betrayed!" Iliana angrily blinked back tears. "She deserved better than this!"

"And she'd still be dead, whatever memorial she had." Watching the woman gently return the skull to the floor, Hilts rose and stepped back. "You're alone here. What happened to ..."

"The Sisters of Seelah?" Iliana kept her face to the wall as she composed herself. "We fought hard when the factions fell upon one another. But then we fell apart—just like everyone else." She shook her head and looked back with golden eyes shot with red. "We had nothing to follow. Seelah was born a slave!"

"I guess so."

"I know it," she said, balling her gloved fists in anger. "As a girl, I once had a Force vision of Seelah. She asked me to avenge her."

Hilts thought about the bas-relief outside. "So that's how you knew how she did her hair."

"But what I never told anyone is what she was *doing* in the vision," she said. "There was this *monster*, this red monster, looking just like that Ravilan in the message. And she was washing its feet!" She lashed out with the Force, shattering the precious bones against the wall. "*Its stinking, disgusting feet!*"

Hilts nodded. Yes, he'd want to be avenged for something like that.

Iliana pushed past him and stomped into the wardroom. "Apparently some of the other Sisters had had similar visions." She rubbed her eye clean of a lingering tear, and then flicked it away, as if it were only grit. "We couldn't stand together long after that."

Among the marble biers, Iliana paused. In a flash, her hand went to her lightsaber. "There's someone out there," she snapped, eyes on the doorway. "*They're here!*"

Hilts hurried into the room, past her. "It's okay. He's with me." He called out for his assistant. Jaye timidly appeared from outside.

Iliana lowered her lightsaber and rolled her eyes. "The figurer? The world's coming to an end and you're still keeping pets!"

"I've got to have something to take care of," Hilts said. "It's my job, after all." He interposed himself between the woman and Jaye. "But what did you mean, 'They're here'?"

"They're looking for me," Iliana said.

"Who?"

"Everyone. Korsin Bentado. What's left of Force Fifty-seven. Those crazy Golden Destiny people," she said. "Everyone who's left. All the final grudges are being settled before we all die."

"They followed you?"

"They will," Iliana said. "I took pieces out of enough of them before I left. I was flying west the last time their trackers saw me. There's nothing farther west than this."

Hilts twirled Jaye around and shoved him back toward the door. "We don't have much time," he said. "Follow me—I'll explain as we go."

The tall woman glared defiantly at him. "I'm not your little clerk. Why should I follow *you* anywhere?"

The Caretaker stared up at her. "Because we may need help to find what we're looking for—and you're at a dead end. You said so yourself." He gestured toward the exit. "Meanwhile, I actually have a plan."

Iliana breathed deeply and stepped toward the exit. "I'm sure it's a foolish plan," she said as she passed.

"My, you're a hateful thing," Hilts said. "Do you come by this naturally?"

She looked down at him and gave a rumpled smile. "Forged myself in Seelah's spirit."

The woman whose skull you just kissed—and then smashed against a wall, he wanted to say. Hilts smirked. Iliana had chosen Seelah to idolize, as anyone nasty would have done. He'd never trust her—Sith never trusted anyone, anyway—but he was beginning to understand her. "Make for the portal up ahead," he said. "At the least, you'll see something no one alive has seen ..."

Hilts watched as Iliana traced the contours of the dark metal with her fingertips. So something *did* exist that could impress her.

The Ship of Destiny.

"It's wonderful," she said.

Omen sprawled beneath the arched ceilings of the Temple, gently lit by the glow rods Jaye was igniting. It had long been said that *Omen* resembled a lanvarok, an ancient Sith wrist-weapon. But no one on Kesh had ever seen a lanvarok—nor had anyone seen *Omen* for centuries. The founders had done their best to preserve it, using only polished stonework around it and limiting the number of entrance passageways, yet the battered vessel still wore a layer of dust.

And battered it was. Even ripped open in places. What did it take to soar in the stars? Hilts wondered. What kind of protection? Quite a bit, judging from the twisted tongues of metal half peeled from the hull. And so much metal! More in one place than anyone alive had ever seen, despite the fact that much of the precious material currently in circulation had been scavenged from fragments of *Omen* left on the mountainside after its crash.

What a calamity that must have been, Hilts thought, observing its size. It was a wonder both ship and mountain had survived.

Iliana claimed the first steps inside for herself, as he had known she would. That was fine with Hilts: he was content to follow along with one of the glow rods Jaye had brought. Seeing the Keshiri quaking timidly on the marble floor outside the hatch, Hilts waved him in.

"It's a sacrilege to be here," Jaye stammered. "I'm a Keshiri, not worthy—"

"Forget about that. We need more light."

Hilts found Iliana in a forward section of the vessel. There, as everywhere else aboard, *Omen* had seen a catastrophe. The ceiling overhead was bowed and buckled. Forward windows were shattered, their panes twisted outward. Had something knocked them out from within? Hilts had no idea.

Nor had he any notion of what he was looking at on either side. Smooth, ebon panels alternated with ruptured ones, exposing the crisped, wiry guts of the ship. Hilts studied one, and then another, recognizing the Sith characters but not all of the terms. *Telemetry*. *Hyperspace*. *Astrogration*. They read as magic words to him. Scholars with the Tribe had attempted to keep the knowledge of space travel alive, but that had faltered like everything else in recent centuries.

Iliana tapped repeatedly at the black panels, as if pressing harder would bring the ship to life. *Yes, she'd be looking for a way offworld*, Hilts thought. *Like everyone else*.

The woman slammed her fist on a panel, cracking it. “Nothing works here!”

“No,” Hilts said. “One thing works.” At the rear of the bridge, Jaye knelt, spellbound, before a gently glowing display. Sith numbers appeared on its face, one melting into the next as seconds passed. It was the device their beloved Sandpipes had been designed to emulate: *Omen’s* chrono.

“It’s still working,” Iliana said, stupefied.

Hilts shrugged. Everything aboard the vessel required some kind of energy; maybe the timekeeping device didn’t use much. He stepped closer and touched the hypnotized Keshiri’s shoulder. “Today the day you thought it was, Jaye?”

Jaye’s mouth opened, but no sound emerged. Finally, his voice dry, he responded. “Yes. The Sandpipes were off by eight days. Just like my theory ...”

Hearing the words trail off, Hilts looked fondly at his clerk. “Very good, Jaye. I’m impressed.” He and Jaye had spent their entire lives studying big questions, knowing they’d never learn whether their solutions were correct. Here Jaye had seen his calculations vindicated, once and for all. It struck Hilts as strange. It was wrong to think that Sith and Keshiri could aspire to the same goals—and yet he and Jaye had. And now Jaye had his answer.

Hilts felt a sudden pang of jealousy and averted his eyes to the center of the room. What *he* was looking for wasn’t here.

“Was this where the command chair went?” Iliana pointed to a bare platform. “The thing you came here to find?”

“I always knew it wouldn’t be inside *Omen*,” Hilts said, stepping toward the dais. “I figured you just had to have a look around.” It was well known from the Keshiri paintings that Korsin had removed his captain’s seat to the colonnade on days when he received visitors. It certainly wasn’t out there now—nor here.

Iliana looked anguished. “I don’t understand. With such a ship, why did Korsin move everyone off the mountain, to Tahv?” She loomed over Hilts as he squatted beside the empty spot. “Maybe *their* generation couldn’t have repaired it—but to stop work entirely and leave? I was right. Korsin was a fool!”

“He wanted the Tribe to commit to their lives on Kesh,” Hilts said. “He knew better than anyone what shape the ship was in. They weren’t going anywhere. You saw the room outside us—there’s no way *Omen* can leave

unless they dismantle the place. They built the shelter around it.” He stepped to the gaping hole forward and looked out at the stone walls beyond. “This isn’t a stable for an uvak, Iliana. It’s a *tomb*.”

Remembering the face from the Testament, Hilts imagined Korsin’s voice describing his strategy. Korsin would have ordered the enclosure to protect it from the elements, and the other castaways would have agreed. But once the Different Ones—Ravilan’s grotesque people—were out of the way, Korsin would have increasingly turned the survivors’ attention toward ruling Kesh. That was the best they could hope for. Sealing the Temple and leaving the mountain ended the temptation.

Until now.

Movement caught his eye, and he gasped.

“Someone’s outside!”

Hilts ducked beneath the shattered viewport. Lights outside cast long shadows against the curved walls. Iliana violently shoved Jaye to the deck and dashed forward to join Hilts. The two carefully peered out as figures entered the Temple bearing glow rods.

The Caretaker counted eight newcomers that he could see, but he could hear the voices of others. Some he recognized instantly. There was bald and burly Korsin Bentado, recognizable as the leader of the Korsinites but badly damaged from the past week’s violence, having lost his left hand somewhere. Three other figures wore the once-shiny tunics of the Golden Destiny, the faction obsessed with the Tribe’s offworld origins; their flashy uniforms had lost their luster.

And one looked familiar. “I know that man,” Hilts whispered to Iliana, pointing to a young blond warrior. Edell Vrai had been one of the few regular visitors to the museum, fascinated by Korsin-era architecture as well as tales of *Omen*, a topic he could go on and on about. Hilts expected Edell to be delighted to see the spacecraft of his dreams at last. And yet the figure outside wore a sour expression.

“It sickens me,” he heard Edell say. “This—this *thing*—is nothing but a carrier for *chattel*!”

Hilts nearly stood at Edell’s words, but Iliana pushed him back down. Together they listened as Edell and his companions, some from different factions, spoke with disdain of the damaged starship.

“A carrier for *vermin*, you mean,” another said.

"It began our race's imprisonment here," Bentado added. "It *is* an omen—but for despair."

"You're right," Edell said, his words echoing throughout the chamber. "*We have to destroy it.*"

Hilts and Iliana looked at each other, stunned. Outside there were rousing calls of agreement, from people who'd never agreed about anything.

"It is right," Bentado's deep voice boomed. "A last, defiant stab. Our people will end—but they will end with a fist clenched in hatred against fate."

"I know just how to do it, too," Edell replied. "One last act of cooperation. We will succeed."

Hilts felt sick as he heard boots on the floor outside, tromping toward the exit. He'd expected the newcomers to try to board *Omen*, as they had. But this was something else. Had the rush toward self-destruction claimed everyone's senses?

Yes, he thought. *Yes, it has.*

"They can't destroy anything this size," Iliana said, her voice raspy as she looked around the bridge. "There are no explosives left. What are they going to do, stab it with lightsabers?"

Hilts didn't know—but he knew not to doubt Edell. "He'll find a way," he said, rising. He grabbed her arm. "Quickly! We have to find what Korsin left behind, before it's too late!"

Chapter Three

Edell had been thinking about this plan for a while, Hilts realized as he peeked through the narrow window of the dome. Situated atop the roof of the Temple, the fancy cupola offered a clear view of the main quadrangle—and from here, Hilts had observed all the activity in wonder.

With the sun setting over the vast western ocean, the Sith warriors' workday was just beginning. At least thirty were here, some in the garb of their different factions; others had abandoned their partisan dress altogether. Many had arrived while Hilts and his two companions awaited their opportunity to leave *Omen* without notice, and all were now engaged in a massive engineering project. Or, rather, a demolition project. Warriors clung to the sides of the giant watchtower, looping long leather cables around the supports. The tower was a marvel, improbably top-heavy with observation decks high aloft; it wouldn't take enormous effort to bring it down.

Hilts saw exactly where it was intended to land. Edell stood on the plaza, directing warriors on how to position their uvak teams. With the beasts on the ground and in the air pulling the cords in unison, Edell clearly expected

the heaviest deck of the stone tower to land right on top of the chamber that held *Omen*.

"That room was well constructed," Iliana said, looking over his shoulder. "Could this harm it?"

"It'll crack like an uvak egg under a hammer," Hilts muttered. He knew Edell—intense, but studious. Edell knew how the classical structures had been built, and he'd seen *Omen's* lair up close. "They may not blow the ship up, but they'll definitely bury it."

Iliana sneered. "It was already dead and buried."

Hilts could only shake his head and stare. There were so many out there, all working at their common, destructive cause. He even recognized Neera, deformed leader of Force 57, throwing her enormous muscled back into the work alongside the other warriors.

"Aren't some of those your Sisters of Seelah with her?" Hilts squinted into the creeping darkness. "Don't you lead them? Won't they listen to you?"

"Haven't you seen what's been going on lately? No one follows anyone now," Iliana said, shrugging. "But they'll work together in this. People need a mission."

Hilts blinked. The unity he'd hoped for—in the cause of crushing all hope. He studied Iliana. "*You* could live—by joining them."

"Not likely. Who do you think took Bentado's hand?"

From behind in the anteroom, a loud click. "I've worked the latch, Caretaker," Jaye said, rising. The massive inner door to the rotunda groaned open for the first time in centuries.

"Small fingers," Hilts said. "Helps to have *someone* following you." Jaye waited for his master and Iliana to enter before following, fresh glow rod in hand.

Where *Omen's* home below had a humongous occupant, nothing stood in this smaller rotunda but a single chair beside a brazier. Hilts stepped eagerly toward it. Yes, it was what he thought it was. The command chair. *The Grand Lord's throne*.

Close enough to touch the seat, Hilts paused and looked around. It was a strange place for it, alone here in this room atop the Temple. He squinted into the void above. Jaye's single glow rod wasn't enough to light the place. "Do you see something up there?"

"I think I know," Iliana said. Grabbing Jaye, she violently ripped the tunic from the startled clerk's back. Without a word, she balled the cloth up and

tossed it into the brazier. With the help of the flint tool chained to the side, she soon had a small fire going. Smoke wafted up to slits near the ceiling apex.

Made chilly, Jaye fretted. "Someone outside might see the smoke."

"I don't care," Iliana said. "I've got nothing left but to fight it out."

Hilts looked at his aide and shrugged. It did get surprisingly cold up here—cold enough to discomfit even a traveler from the stars. "Just stay close to the fire," he said, before glancing upward.

For a moment he thought he saw the stars outside. Then with another look, he realized that he had—in a way.

"A planetarium!"

Embedded in the rounded ceiling were crimson stones, glowing warmly as the fire below flickered. One by one, he picked out the stars of Kesh's summer sky—and saw many smaller ones he wasn't familiar with.

"Are those Lignan crystals up there?" Iliana asked.

Hilts laughed. "Why not?" *Omen's* crew would have had plenty of them.

He turned his attention back to the chair, the missing piece from the starship's bridge. It wasn't hard to imagine Yaru Korsin here, sitting at night, contemplating his people's return to the stars. He thought again about Korsin's line from the Testament. What was behind the throne? Nothing here that he could see—just empty wall. Was it something in the star map? No, that was above.

Indifferent to the display overhead—and to any sense of history—Iliana flopped onto the chair, throwing her booted legs over the armrest.

Hilts gawked at her. "You're going to sit *there*?"

"I'm not going to. I am." Casually, she unclipped her lightsaber and tossed it from hand to hand. "Those people outside will either bring the Temple down underneath us, or they'll find us here. If I'm going to wait, I'm going to sit."

"Whatever."

"You know, this room is pretty useless," Iliana said, cracking her wrists. "It only shows the sky at one time of the year."

Hilts nodded. It was more decorative than useful. But his thoughts were still on the chair—and Korsin's Testament.

"Do you have a knife?"

"Of course," Iliana said, using the Force to whip a glass blade from a compartment in her boot. The weapon paused in midair, hovering near Hilts's face.

"Thanks a lot," he said, taking it and kneeling behind the chair.

Behind the throne. Tentatively, almost fearfully, Hilts slid the tip of the shikkar into the tough skin of the back of the seat. The Sith didn't outfit their ships for comfort, he saw—but even the rough hide of the command chair was no match for the Keshiri blade. Careful to cut no more than he had to, Hilts withdrew the knife and slipped his hand inside the furnishing.

Continuing to sit, Iliana watched the old man fish around aimlessly, his arm up to his elbow inside the chair. "You look like a fool," she said.

He felt like one, too—and was about to stop when his hand reached the level of the armrests. "There's something in here," he said. "Sewn inside!" He drew his hand out quickly, ripping the upholstery more as he did.

The glass vial contained a single rolled-up sheet of transparent film—flimsier than the thinnest parchment the Keshiri had ever crafted. As he brought it closer to the failing fire, figures began to take shape.

"What's that writing in?" Iliana asked, suddenly interested.

"It's the old cant of the Tapani—the language of the humans under Sith rule," Hilts said. "The language of Korsin's mother."

"How do you know?"

"Because I studied it—and *she wrote it*." He nudged Iliana's legs off the armrest and brought the film as close to the fire as he dared. "Takara Korsin. Korsin's father left her for Jariad's mother." His eyes scanned the page. He'd spent the previous year studying a text on the language. Slowly, surely, he worked it out.

"It's marked personal," he said. "Brought by a trusted courier to Korsin." Swallowing, he recited:

"I know you tire of hearing of my visions, my son. If you do as you always have, I expect you won't read this until your mission is well under way. I'm pleased that you've been given command of an important assignment for Naga Sadow—even as it grieves me, as it does all our kind, to know that your victory is for his glory alone.

"Yes, I've had another of the visions. I saw our descendants ruling a great people one day—free from the Red Sith. We will have something that will be our own. When they are guided well, I see new horizons opening up—new places to conquer.

"Yaru, only you are wise enough to guide our people. Devore will be his own ruin; I sense strength in his chosen mate, Seelah, but that is not enough. You alone know how to manage the ambitions of many—how to shape your anger, and sculpt it to fit the purpose ahead."

"You do have a purpose. Take care. If you guide our people well, they will always have a mission."

Hilts drew the letter back from the fire and stared. He didn't even notice Jaye's cautious, reverential approach, behind him. "Look at the time imprint," the shivering Keshiri said, pointing over Hilts's shoulder to figures along the edge. "He received this right before *Omen* left for Phaegon."

Hilts nodded as he considered the words. No, Korsin wouldn't have wanted anyone to read the message while he was still working for Naga Sadow—hence the hiding place. But for a quarter of a century, Korsin had kept the message always near to him. "I always wondered how he found the strength to go on," he said.

"Cheerleading claptrap from a doting mother," Iliana said. "Even Korsin couldn't have believed this nonsense."

"Hush, girl." He glared at her. "She was *wise*. She saw what we would build. And this proves that our people weren't destined to live as slaves forever. We have a future." Hilts stood suddenly and started toward the exit. "Those people out there. If I could read it to them—"

"They won't listen," Iliana said. "It's too far gone. I know *I* wouldn't listen."

Hilts stopped before reaching the doorway. He looked at the letter again and frowned.

Iliana was right. The sentiments were a balm to the spirits—but the people needed a specific cause. Like knocking down a tower and destroying a spaceship.

"What cause *would* you rally to?" he asked, rolling the letter up and putting it back into its tube.

Iliana answered without a second thought. "Myself."

"Hmmm."

He could hear more shouts outside, past the anteroom. The wrecking crew would be farther along now. Hilts and his companions couldn't stay. Not here, not far atop *Omen*'s resting place—

"Wait," Hilts said, looking to the floor.

Jaye shivered beside the cooling brazier. “What is it, Caretaker?”

“This message—this isn’t what Korsin meant.” He looked to the chair where Iliana still sat. “Remember the quote. The true power is *behind* the throne. Not *in* the throne. Not behind the one who sits in it!”

“You want to argue semantics now?” Iliana shook her head. “No, no. You’re looking for precision in the words of a dying fool—”

“A fool smart enough to conquer a whole native people—and to train a daughter for war under everyone’s noses. No,” Hilts said, rolling the tube with the missive over in his hand. “This message was important to Korsin, but it isn’t what he meant.” He looked back up to the ceiling, where the false stars had faded with the fire. “*None of this* is right.”

Iliana shifted in the seat. “What do you mean?”

“This place. I can’t believe Korsin spent all his time here,” he said. “You’re correct. This map above—it’s not practical. It’s decorative. Korsin’s focus was on building an empire on Kesh. He wasn’t sitting around looking at the stars!” Hilts stalked around the room. “And Korsin. You saw how he looked in the recording.”

“I remember,” Iliana said, interest growing as the Caretaker grew more animated. “He was bleeding to death.”

“The legend says that Korsin was mortally wounded outside, on the western slope, and made his way back to his chair to record the Testament.”

“Back here,” Jaye said.

“No!” Hilts thought back on the shimmering message he’d seen days earlier. No, there hadn’t been any background in the image. They had been able to see the chair, but no more. “We *assumed* that he recorded it here, when we found the chair. But look how high we are. Yaru couldn’t have made it up all those stairs with a gaping chest wound. I’m *healthy*, and I nearly didn’t!”

Iliana stood and looked back at the seat. “I don’t get it. They moved his chair here after he died?” She shrugged. “Why? And where would he have gone instead?”

Hilts stewed for several moments before his aide, now huddled on the floor near the brazier for warmth, piped up. “Perhaps there’s something in the chamber beneath *Omen*.”

“*Beneath*?” Hilts blinked in the near-darkness of the rotunda. “There isn’t any chamber beneath *Omen*. They built the Temple over the ship where it came to rest.”

“But the ship landed on a slope,” Jaye said, “and what we saw was completely level. They shored it up with stonework.” He fidgeted, counting on purple fingertips before looking up. “We entered the Temple through an open passage at the twenty-third step on the staircase from the middle terrace. But we passed a sealed door at the *seventh* step.” The little Keshiri crossed his arms with satisfaction. “Another chamber, at the base of *Omen*’s support structure.”

Iliana rolled her eyes. “He *counted the steps*?”

“He counted the steps,” Hilts said, smirking.

His momentarily improved mood was cut short by a mild shudder, reverberating through the floor. The impromptu allies outside were getting closer to their goal. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go!”

Chapter Four

It hadn't seen a visitor in nearly two thousand years—and it didn't look like it had seen much traffic when people had lived here, either. Unlike *Omen's* resting place above them and the celestial dome atop it all, this lower level wasn't a shrine, and it wasn't for show. The narrow hallway through the darkness lacked holders for glow rods, and compared with the ornate doors elsewhere, the entrance to the octagonal room was positively modest.

Hilts and his companions had entered the catacombs after slipping past confusion on the plaza. Cables had snapped, temporarily thwarting Edell's plan to collapse the tower onto *Omen*—but Hilts knew they'd figure it out sooner or later. *He* had to figure out what Korsin had meant sooner.

Which was difficult in the dark.

"Find some more glow rods," he ordered. Jaye nodded and scampered out.

Between the few they'd brought and the light from his and Iliana's lightsabers, they'd been able to recognize the room's main feature. A massive stone-carved map of Keshtah, their continent, dominated one of the walls; small Lignan crystals had been worked into the design to indicate

settlements. It was the planetary equivalent of the sky map, upstairs. One wall had the doorway; the other six held only large, blank slabs of slate the same size as the Keshtah map.

"I don't like being here," Iliana said, gripping her lightsaber tightly. "This is a dead end."

"Dead is right," Hilts said, looking up. "Yaru Korsin died here. I can feel it."

Iliana's eyes narrowed for a moment. "I feel it, too," she said. "It feels good."

Hilts ignored her, kneeling at the center of the room and bringing his lightsaber close to the floor. "Ruts," he said, feeling the stone surface. "Four of them. This is where Yaru Korsin's chair was kept at night." He looked to the wall map. "And that's what it faced."

"Why wouldn't they leave Korsin's chair here after he died?"

"Maybe Nida wanted anyone who entered in the future to think that Yaru spent all his time contemplating the cosmos—and their return."

Iliana sneered. "Then maybe she should have punched some windows in the room where they kept the ship."

Hilts stood and walked to the map. Yes, it made sense. This wasn't a fancy place—it was a place for work, where Korsin plotted the Tribe's management of their new world. He might have brought only his trusted Keshiri aides here, to work on the map. Looking back, he squinted through the darkness at the other walls. Humongous black slates, pegged to the walls by metal spikes that must have come from *Omen*. Hilts could imagine Korsin working here, chalking out his plans for the Tribe. If the captain's chair always faced the map—and he couldn't imagine otherwise—then nothing was "behind the throne" at all. Just blank stone panels.

He deactivated his lightsaber and stared into the darkness.

What did Korsin mean?

A thought occurring to him, Hilts took a step away from the map—only to see a flailing figure hurtle into the room, launched from the hallway by a massive Force push.

"Jaye!" Hilts yelled as the Keshiri landed meters short of the far wall. The old man scrambled to his aide's side and turned him over—only to see the wounds seared into the clerk's bare chest.

The work of a lightsaber. Or several.

"I'm sorry, Caretaker," Jaye said, coughing as life escaped. "I tried ... to find ... some more glow rods ..."

Stunned, Hilts looked to the side, where Iliana had already vaulted into a defensive posture. One after another, the figures they'd seen outside *Omen* charged into the room, lightsabers in hand.

"Well, well," Korsin Bentado said, voice dripping with gruesome delight. "So this is where the chief Sister scurried off to!" He raised his truncated left arm. "I've been looking for you!"

"You're not the only one," barked Neera, alongside Edell and several of his Golden Destiny companions, blocking any escape. "Pretty little menace—it's time to be done with you!"

"Let's put her in the tower and watch her plummet," Bentado said.

"No," said another, gesturing to a disfigurement that Iliana had evidently delivered. "Let's chain her to the spot where the hammer will fall!"

"Forget that!" Iliana yelled, poised to move. "We finish this now!"

"*Stop!*"

The Caretaker's shout echoed around the room, attracting the newcomers' attention to him for the first time. Cradling his dead assistant in his arms, he yelled again. "*Which one of you did this?*"

"What difference does it make?" Bentado's teeth glistened in the light given off by the glowing weaponry. "He was a Keshiri. His presence profanes this place."

"*What?*" Releasing Jaye, Hilts bolted to his feet, feeling anger he hadn't known since his youth. "The Keshiri helped to *build* this place. And profane? You're the ones trying to destroy the Temple, and *Omen* in it!"

"All life is profane," Neera said. She'd added some fresh scars since the last time he saw her. "You saw our alien masters. You know just how disgusting life can be."

Hilts took a step toward the party, only to see Edell step to the front. "I know how you feel about this place, Caretaker. But the joke's on us—*all* of us. Everything we were ever told about the Tribe is a lie. It's over. There's no sense in clinging to places like this. It's just one more score to settle. We wipe it out—and then one another."

"This isn't the end," Hilts yelled. "This isn't the end!"

"No," Edell said, a chill in his voice. "The end already happened. We just didn't know it." The warriors surged forward toward the center of the room,

bowling Hilts over as they sought to engage Iliana, the more dangerous of their prey.

Tumbling backward, Hilts saw again the blank slabs on the walls, suspended on their metal spikes. For some bizarre reason, at this moment he found himself thinking the thought he'd had just before Jaye had been hurled into the room: Why waste precious metal on hanging *chalkboards*?

Suddenly he knew!

With a tremendous effort, Hilts yanked at the metal rods through the Force, ripping them from the walls. On six sides of the room, the massive stone panels came loose, falling forward and slamming to the floor. Hilts yanked at Iliana, pulling her clear of one of the falling monoliths.

Thoom! Thoom! Thoom! Thoom! Thoom!

Doom!

Seeing the other warriors reeling from the surprise and impact, Hilts reached his feet first and grabbed a glow rod. Turning it toward the walls facing the map wall, he saw what he expected to see ...

... the rest of the world!

Edell Vrai looked at the wall nearest him. "What—what is this?"

"It's a map of Kesh," Hilts said, bringing his light close to the display on the far wall. The revealed panels adjacent to the map of Keshtah were blank—but the four panels on the other side of the room depicted a massive continent, dwarfing the place they knew. "It's a map of Kesh's far side. It's the rest of the world!"

Iliana gawked. "But there's nothing beyond the oceans! They explored everything after *Omen* arrived!"

"They only knew what they could see, on uvak-back—and in places where uvak could reach," Hilts said, excitedly running his fingertips across the map. There were crystals denoting cities here, too—far more than on the familiar map across the room—and Tapani characters etched nearby. "This was what was behind the throne," he said, turning to face the others. "This is what Korsin meant!"

As the Caretaker turned back, the warriors spread across the room, using their lightsabers now for illumination rather than defense. "What's this writing here?" Edell asked, frustrated. "There's a lot of it in this spot."

"Just a moment," Hilts said, stepping over to the section. It had been etched with a diamond stylus—an artifact he'd remembered puzzling over

as curator in the Tahv palace, years earlier. “This is Korsin’s own handwriting!”

The room fell silent as he studied. There were some new words here, which he made out to refer to the Kesh and Keshiri, terms that wouldn’t have been known in the Tapani dialect. Korsin was evidently a wordsmith, along with everything else. Haltingly, he recited, as best he could ...

“Nida, you will know this language from the studies I’ve assigned you—but you won’t know this map. No one does. It’s based on the last data recorded by the cams of Omen during our descent across the dark side of Kesh. When I discovered a cam with a working display, I hid the device, transferring over the years what it saw to the map panels here until its power finally gave out.

“Our people and the Keshiri have thought this continent was all there was, alone in a gigantic sea. Taking control of the continent of Keshtah gave our people a purpose. But we’ve just been on Keshtah Minor. This map displays another land mass with us in the southern hemisphere—Keshtah Major—far beyond the range of any uwak to fly! And with far more people!

“And yes, there are people. There must be. The crystals represent lights—lights!—seen on the dark side of the planet. There are cities there, another whole civilization. Keshiri, likely, but perhaps more advanced—and possibly not in fear of the Skyborn. They could add to our power—or could be our enemies.

“For years, I’ve secretly annotated the map based on what I could make out before the images died. It’s truly another world. I’ve done all I can now, and my trusted Keshiri are sealing the map panels in advance of our move to Tahv.

“But you—or your descendants—may one day need a cause that will unite our people. The knowledge I leave here is true power. Envy has driven the Sith to great accomplishments. Now there is again something to covet—something that may be within reach of the properly led ...”

The room remained silent after he stopped reading. Hilts looked at the words again—and the great new map, surrounding the text—and exhaled. Awkwardly, he felt a bulge in his vest pocket and produced the glass tube. “Umm—I have a letter from his mother, too.”

Standing peaceably alongside Iliana before the new maps, Bentado looked back at Hilts. “He’s got more of the same writing everywhere. Are there guides to this language?”

“There were,” Hilts said, “until you people destroyed my archives.” He shuffled his feet. “I’m the only one who knows it now.” Hearing his own words, he straightened. *I’m the only one who knows it now!*

“This is ... *unimaginable*,” Iliana said. “Why didn’t Korsin tell anyone?”

“He already had a continent to conquer,” Hilts said. “And his feud with Seelah and Jariad was too personal—they wouldn’t have been moved by this.” He looked at the gathered rivals. “But it’ll move our people now. If you need Sith to act in unison—give them an enemy.”

Taking advantage of the peace, Hilts unrolled the missive from Takara Korsin. He read of the destiny of the Tapani humans, who had wandered into Sith territory and had been enslaved—and he read of their future, ruling someplace on their own. And then another place. And another. *“If you guide our people well, they will always have a mission.”*

Edell looked dazzled. “How will we get there?” Everyone in the room knew the problem. The Keshiri weren’t a naval culture. The local woods were either too dense to float or too flimsy to bear any weight.

“It’ll be the biggest thing our society’s ever undertaken,” Hilts said. “We’ll never be able to do it if we act like we have been. We’ll need everybody.” He nodded to the deformed Neera. *“Everybody.* It will require order, and discipline.” He paused. *“As in the days of old.”*

Abruptly Edell snapped off his lightsaber. “We will craft the society again as in the old ways.” He stepped toward Hilts and knelt. “You are the Caretaker. You alone know the old tongue—and you know the old ways better than anyone. You will guide our people well.”

Hilts looked in astonishment at the young man kneeling before him. Edell’s fellow Golden Destiny members bowed, as well. To the side, Korsin Bentado paused—and finally nodded, dipping his bald head as he fell to his knees. “You have redeemed our faith in Korsin.”

Even Neera knelt. “Where no path existed, you found one wide enough for all. Alone, you have my trust.”

Soon only Iliana remained standing, gawking in shock at the sight of her collected assailants, all genuflecting before the dumbfounded museum curator.

“All hail Varner Hilts—the new Grand Lord!”

Chapter Five

Hilts had given the previous age its name. Now, with the Time of the Rot ending, he had also named the era to come.

The Hilts Restoration. He liked the sound of it.

The largest surviving faction after the two-week chaos had been the Golden Destiny, and it turned out to be fortuitous. Like their rivals, they wanted to seize power on Kesh, but they'd always had their eyes set in the right direction: outward. Hilts couldn't offer them the return to the stars they wanted, but he'd found a new world for them to conquer. Accompanied by Bentado, Neera, and the others, they'd fanned out quickly onto the mainland, announcing the great tidings. The Tribe's governing system would be restored and set toward a goal.

Hilts didn't worry about how they'd reach the new continent. As his chief engineer, Edell promised to attack the problem with vigor, studying ways to span distances greater than any uvak or watercraft ever had. It might take years, decades, or even centuries—but the Tribe would succeed.

The new Grand Lord did wonder about what they'd find. Had Korsin told Adari Vaal about the new continent? Whether he had or not, if she had

somehow reached there with her flight of stolen uvak, the residents would know the Sith existed. Korsin's note was likely correct. The conquest of the new continent wouldn't be as easy as the takeover of the old one.

The prospect of the challenge made him feel young again.

There was one last thing. It had come to Hilts almost as an afterthought. As soon as Edell and the others had announced his elevation, Hilts had seen the fire flash in Iliana's eyes. She'd been the one vying for power, after all, not the Caretaker. He wasn't supposed to be the one lifted on high. But after the initial shock—and realizing that Bentado and his companions still felt vengeful toward Iliana for her past actions—he'd thought of the absolute right thing to say to her, before all of them.

"If I am to be Grand Lord, I will need a wife."

The surprise hadn't been all hers, at first; Hilts could hardly believe he'd said it. He never knew exactly what she'd thought of it, either—until now, here on the sundappled colonnade outside the mountaintop Temple. Tall and regal, Iliana stood across from him, shimmering in a golden gown, product of the labors of the finest Keshiri artisans. Nuptial rituals were always just one more excuse for a celebration, as far as Tribe members were concerned; fidelity meant little to a Sith believer. But property meant a whole lot, and Iliana had just attained quite a bit. Several of her former Sisters of Seelah were here in their own regalia, he saw; evidently, this turn of events had patched up every rift on the continent.

Twirling Seelah's ancient commitment band on her finger, Iliana smiled weakly for the others—and then glared privately at Hilts. "We both know this is ridiculous," she whispered. "If you think I'm going to be all thankful to you for saving me—"

"I would never think that," Hilts said.

That seemed to satisfy the woman for a moment. But as Tribe members passed them on the receiving line, Iliana had a sudden thought.

"Wait," she said, under her breath. "If you're restoring the old ways— isn't the consort of the Grand Lord put to death on his passing?" Her eyebrows flared. "That's right. It's in Korsin's Testament!"

"Oh, is that in there?" Hilts looked up at her, mildly. "I'd forgotten."

Iliana smoldered. Hilts looked at his young bride and grinned. There would be wise leadership so long as he lived—and he could live another forty years, because there would be someone to make sure he did. Powerful, youthful, and devious, fighting all his battles. Surely some had assented to

his elevation because he was an easy target—but *she* wasn't. And the only way to protect her own life was to protect his.

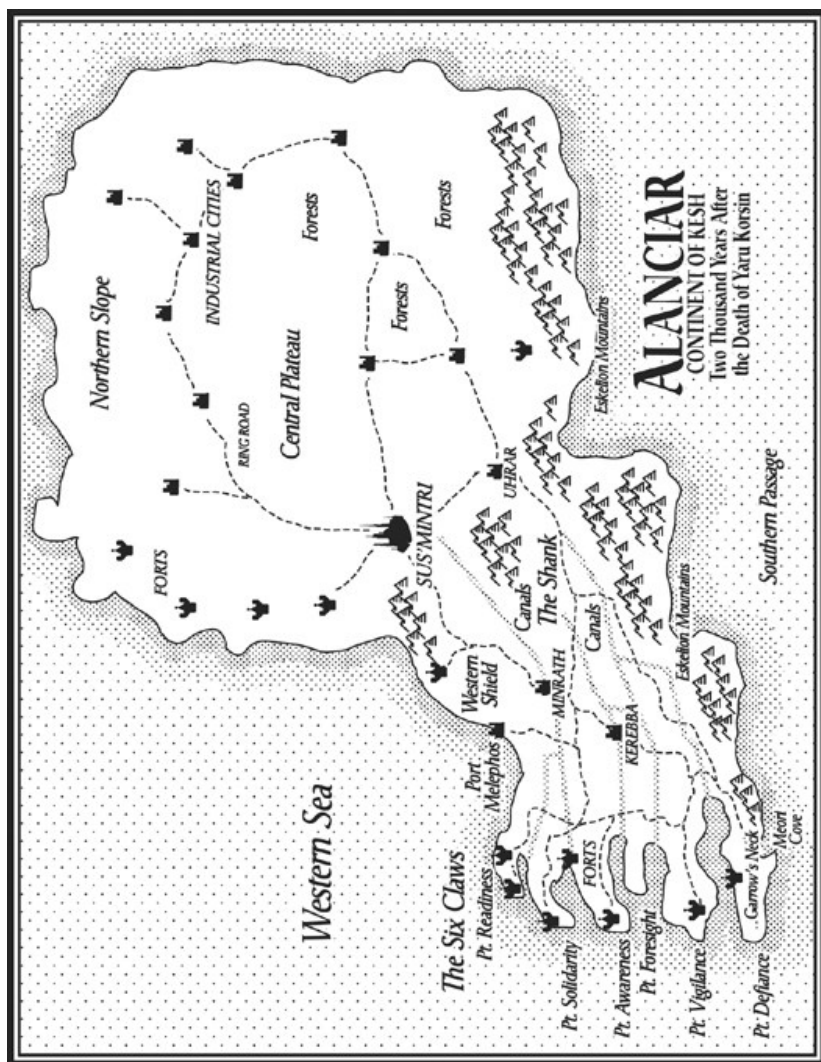
Hilts looked up to the statue, looming over them both. There he was: Yaru Korsin, wise beyond all—even in matters of marriage. Behind the statue stood row after row of cleanly dressed Tribe members, at attention and waiting their turn to meet the new leader and his bride. Every surviving Sith on Keshtah Minor must be here today, Hilts thought. Some were worse for wear for the past month's riots, but they were here, celebrating both his marriage and the last day of the Festival of Nida's Rise. This would be one fête month no one would ever forget!

Along the sides of the colonnade stood hundreds of Keshiri, cheering and applauding. Waving to them, Hilts received a collective squeal of approval in response. The Keshiri couldn't yet become part of the Tribe themselves, but Hilts would change that. Many of them had useful talents, and the Tribe might well need the help of all in the challenge ahead.

For a moment, he imagined what poor little Jaye would have looked like in the uniform of a Tyro or Saber. Hilts smiled at the thought. It would take a while, but he would do it.

Reading history had been his life. Now he would write his own.

The Tribe would go on.



Pandemonium

Chapter One

2,975 years BBY

“Ready! Aim! Fire!”

A dozen wooden launchers sounded in unison, the mighty *click-crack* echoing throughout the fortress. After a second for the ballisteers to reload, a similar sound followed. And then another. The noise marked the quarter hour here in the little village, the same way it did in the larger cities of the continent. It could well have been the national anthem, some had said—but Alanciar already had patriotic songs in plenty.

The gunners were good here, Quarra thought, observing the practice range as she guided her muntok into the compound. The arrival of the lumbering six-legged reptile and its Keshiri rider did nothing to distract the cadets from their shooting. The second between shots of their high-tension hand-ballistae was a quicker rate than most gunners of the metropolitan uplands could manage. Was it the weapons or the warriors? *Probably both*, she mused. Her own district of Uhrar was farther back in the continent’s interior. The Keshiri here at the fort at Garrow’s Neck, sitting athwart one of the long spurs into the western sea, would have to be better: this was where the threat was.

Quarra had every right to be here, but she still felt out of place. Tan-and-gray waistcoat, silver hair balled tightly into a bun—that was fine military style where she was from, but this was a working camp. She’d known hard work, but lately it had been of a different—

“Halt, there!” A burgundy-faced captain near the range blew a whistle and ran toward her.

Quarra yanked the reins and called out. The massive muntok skidded violently to a stop, spraying purple grit into the face of the approaching officer. He swore as he tried to clean his one good eye.

“Sorry,” Quarra said, slapping the jowls of the growling beast. “Muntoks are all legs and a cloud of sand.”

The captain didn’t laugh. “Documents!”

“I was already cleared at the east gate. How do you think I got—”

“*Documents!*” He lifted his sidearm. It was, she assumed, loaded with fragmenting sliver-bolts, not the cheap glass rods fired by the trainees.

“Right.” *They’re all business out west*, Quarra thought, reaching into her pouch. She passed a leather folder to the captain. “Letters of transit and my commission.”

The trainees had stopped shooting now, their young eyes on her. Male and female Keshiri ranging in age from twelve to fifteen, all on their first draft detail. Quarra looked from face to fresh face. Her oldest daughter would be training just like them in another year.

She watched the captain as he flipped through her papers. Maybe he’d lost the eye to a recruit. Or maybe not: he was old for this duty—which meant he was good at it. No sensible official would transfer a talented ballisteer from Garrow’s Neck. This was where the action was.

Or, rather, *would be*.

“Wardmaster Quarra Thayn,” he groaned, the sight of the raised insignia evidently ruining his appetite for the next month. “I’ve stopped a wardmaster. I’m sorry, ma’am.”

Tempted to lord over the officer, Quarra remembered why she was there. “It’s no problem, Captain ...”

“Ruehn. Training division of the 108th, Southwestern Directorate.”

“Don’t be sorry, Ruehn. You’re out at the knife’s point. Or close enough.”

Her pass indicated she was headed for Point Defiance. One of Alanciar’s westernmost spurs, the cone of granite punctuated the far end of the

isthmus past the fortress. The continent, many said, resembled a muntok's leg. The bulk of population and industry lived in the higher elevations of the enormous hip to the east. The canal-crossed region known as the Shank stabbed west, terminating in the Six Claws, nearly parallel mountain peninsulas reaching into the western sea. Each Claw had a signal station at the far end: preparations for when the dreaded day came at last.

The captain cleared his throat as he folded up the parchment. "Surprised you're not back with the rest of the mucky-mucks with Observance Day coming up," he said.

"It seemed like a good time to visit the front."

The sentry's good eye gave a wink. "Battlefront, my purple behind! My day's spent keeping my draftees inside the walls. The Shore Guard swipes anyone that's out and about for itself. Thirty years, and that's the only battle *I've* fought."

Quarra replaced the documents in her binder. She pointed to the tall gates up ahead. "Is that the way?"

"Unless you want to swim." The flying riding beasts called uvak were the exclusive province of the Shore Guard in these areas, and waterborne travel in the east-west fjords formed by the Six Claws was highly restricted. There was no access to Point Defiance but through the military camp at Garrow's Neck. "Enjoy your visit. And stay ready."

"Stay ready," she said, taking up the reins.

Prodding her muntok back into a trot, Quarra made for the western barricades, the product of hundreds of years of construction and renovation. But what caught her eye was the signal tower, standing tall between rings of the fortress. Brilliant-colored lights in the belfry flashed on and off, easily visible in the late afternoon. She studied it as she passed—and remembered again why she was here.

It had all begun with messages sent three years earlier through that exact relay station. And now, up ahead, she saw the source of those missives for the first time. As the mighty gate opened to permit her exit, she looked out upon the rocky trail. Half surrounded by a cloud of sea-mist, Point Defiance jutted from an angry ocean. A lonely silo perched atop the promontory, blinking tiny lights in response to the faraway fortress above her.

She thought for a moment about turning back, about retracing the long journey that had brought her here. If she reached an uvak livery before night fell, she could be back in the world she knew before anyone was the wiser.

For Quarra Thayn—wife and mother of three, chief military administrator of Uhrar, and a rare Keshiri wielder of the mysterious power known as the Force—was at this moment thought to be elsewhere. Officially, she was supposed to be on a working tour of the battle-armor factories on the Northern Slope of Alanciar, not heading to a secret meeting in the middle of nowhere with someone she had never met.

Behind her, the ballisteers resumed firing, their shots in syncopation with the flashing signals far ahead. Almost hypnotized by the sight and sound, she felt her future stretching ahead of her. This was something she had to do.

She breathed deeply and kicked the muntok into a run.

This had better be worth it.

The sun shone low over the western ocean, but Quarra wasn't fooled. The darkness was out there, in that direction. The Herald had come from the west, just as the currents of air and sea did in this southerly latitude. Westward lay deceit and treachery, hatred and panic.

But the Protectors who had created Alanciar and all of Kesh had provided well for their people. The Six Claws were like talons, rocky points on which battlements had been erected. For centuries, the fjords had been busy harbors for the Shore Guard's patrol vessels, while its watchers on uvak sailed overhead. At times, all six peninsulas had been fortified and active.

Quarra still saw the windswept remnants of some of those earlier installations here on Point Defiance. A cluster of ruins spread out before the signal tower, and ruined they were—clearly, the troops at Garrow's Neck had practiced demolitions here in some earlier time. Much of the outpost had been abandoned as operations had been consolidated on the wider spurs of land farther north. While not as far west as Defiance, some of the other peninsulas rose higher, offering better coverage of the harbors—and being to the north, they were better placed to guard the mass of Alanciar. Since the new installations had gone in, aerial and seaborne patrols had been brought closer to the coastline. It would be a mistake for a people in hiding to accidentally awaken the Destructors by ranging too far out to sea.

The signal station loomed large before her, an alabaster cylinder rising over a walled courtyard. Railed perches on the tower's upper level looked out in all directions, with the all-important grid of fireglobes sitting on

stanchions above the eastern balcony. Dismounting outside the wall, Quarra found a post and tied up the muntok.

"Fog's rolling in," said a gap-toothed Keshiri male in his sixties as he opened the gate. "Could be a storm."

Quarra blanched upon seeing him. Tiny growths of waxy hair terminated in comical points behind his ears, and the buttons of his uniform struggled to restrain his gut. "You're not Jogan Halder?"

"Mercy, no," her greeter said. "He's in the tower. I work with him."

Inwardly, Quarra breathed a sigh of relief. "You're the thoughtcrier?"

I am, he said through the Force. *And you?*

Quarra closed her eyes and sent a telepathic response in the affirmative. She reopened her eyes quickly, to see the old Keshiri smiling.

"Nice to meet another who has the gift," he said. "But I barely heard you. You tired?"

"Been a long ride." Quarra tensed up. It had been a long time since she'd been called upon to use the Force in her job. Lately, she'd only used it to amuse her kids, and to see if they possessed her rare talents. That was out of simple maternal curiosity; the Induction Board would eventually discover for sure which children had the talent.

Heaving her duffel bag off the muntok's back, Quarra turned and proffered her document pouch. "You want to see these?"

"No need," he said jovially. "Our friends at the fort wouldn't have let you get this far otherwise." He stepped out, bearing luggage. "If things go as usual, they'll frisk me for an hour at every gate. Better go now, before the officers' club closes."

Exhaling, Quarra placed the documents back inside her waistcoat. Bag in hand, she waved to the thoughtcrier and shut the gate behind her. She was here—and inside.

Tentatively, she crossed the lawn to the open door of the tower. She heard singing within, echoing up through the massive stone cylinder. Clutching her duffel tightly by the string handle, Quarra stepped inside and tilted her head. Wooden stairs spiraled up, nearly out of sight. The wood grain of the steps didn't match, evidently having been replaced many times in the station's life. But someone had started painting them in gradually changing hues, creating the effect of a twirling rainbow.

Around the circular room, she saw doorways connecting to the rest of the complex. She could smell something was cooking in a small kitchen; two

open doors led to sparsely furnished bedrooms, side by side. And a final passage led downstairs—to the singing.

“Hup, harroo, for a life with you!” called a baritone voice, growing louder. *“The sea’s my home and though I roam I’ll always stay—”*

“True?” Quarra stood before the door. “I haven’t heard that one.”

“Sailor’s song. We get them here,” the short-haired Keshiri said, his meaty arms laden with bound volumes of parchment. “You’re Quarra?”

“Guilty.” She dropped the duffel with a thud. “Can I help you with those?”

“No problem,” he said, stepping past. Skin a robust mauve, with a closely shaved patch of silvery beard, the uniformed man was twice her weight and in incredible shape.

And he’s my age? He must run up and down these stairs a lot.

“Sorry I wasn’t there to greet you,” he said, setting the monstrous pile of books on a rickety table. “I was down in the library, in case you were late. I like to read while I eat.” He stepped through a stone archway and found a glass pot simmering over spent coals. “Stew’s always on here. Something to eat?”

“I’m fine,” she said, leaning in the doorway. “You’re—”

“Oh,” he said, dropping the spoon and wiping his hands. “Sorry. Jogan Halder.” He shook her hand. “No big-city manners out here.”

“It’s okay,” Quarra said, smiling in spite of herself as she felt his firm grip. Suddenly self-conscious, she drew her hand back. “You have a *library* here?”

“Such as it is!” Jogan smiled, leading her out. “I get to Garrow’s Neck on leave, and sometimes travelers leave things there to read. Not much to do here.” He pointed up to where the painted steps ended. “Sometimes one of the other signal stations will send news when there’s no other traffic. But it’s a slow way to read.”

Quarra knew what he meant. Her conversations with Jogan had started three years earlier during a routine visit to Kerebba, a military supply center upstream on one of the canals that emptied into one of the bays defined by the Six Claws. She’d spoken to a cousin there who’d saved months of tales of the frontier transmitted to her by a signal officer in his off-duty hours. Quarra had read the collection thoroughly, enchanted by the author’s wordplay and honest, bruising appraisal of life at the edge of civilization. When her cousin was reassigned, Quarra had sent a message through the signal station at Uhrar introducing herself.

What had followed had transformed her life. More than a thousand messages had passed between Jogan and Quarra. Mostly arriving overnight, his dispatches had awaited her when she reached her office each morning. She soon began carrying them with her throughout her rounds, leafing secretly through them to get through the drudgery of her days. Pointless distribution meetings became opportunities for her to brainstorm the responses she sent him before going home. She had struggled to make her own life sound exciting; eventually, as trust grew, she shared her feelings about her job and household. She was thankful her access to the semaphore system was limited, lest her ranting grow unbearable. But Jogan had always been understanding, taking his long nights to craft thoughtful and eloquent responses.

And now she was here, in his element. She'd imagined him many times, in his fog-enshrouded outpost on the edge of the safe world. He wasn't a disappointment—and he definitely seemed to be paying attention to her. Spying the coatrack, she removed her overcoat to reveal her dress uniform. It was necessary for her travels, but she'd left the decorations in her desk at work. She felt awkward enough without visibly outranking him in their first meeting.

"You met Belmer on the way out?"

"I did," Quarra said. She chuckled. "I was afraid he was you."

"No, but I do send romantic messages out for him under my name." He laughed. "Just kidding. Belmer's loves are all fermented."

"Not exactly what you want in a thoughtcrier at the front, is it?"

"He doesn't drink on duty, of course." He reached for her duffel bag. "Let me take that." She watched with anticipation as he placed it between the doors to the two bedchambers, almost the baggage-handling equivalent of a wink. They hadn't spoken in specifics about sleeping arrangements for the week of her visit—that would be too premeditated. It had been more fun to wonder.

"Forgive the look of the place. We're at the end of the inspection route, and with old bachelors, you can imagine ..."

"I have three kids. You should see my place when my husband's away at work too long," she said, immediately regretting it.

"Your husband—*Brue*, isn't it? How's he doing?"

"He's fine," Quarra said, sorry she had ever invoked him. *Stupid, stupid!* Her eyes darted to the side. "How about that tour you promised me?"

“Happy to show you around, though there’s not much to see,” Jogan said. “But first things first, Quarra. Come along.”

Seeing him beckon for her to follow, Quarra hesitated before realizing what he had in mind. Embarrassed at where her thoughts had gone, she followed him up the spiral staircase to the signal tower. She shook her head as she climbed and wondered about her mental stability.

I haven't been fourteen in thirty years! What in blazes is wrong with me?

Chapter Two

“Here’s where the magic happens,” Jogan said, helping her into the belfry. “What there is of it.”

Just inside the doorway facing west, a wooden stand held cylinders of various sizes. Each drum had several slate-covered wheels oriented around a central dowel, with lines dividing the circumference of each wheel into equal parts. Jogan selected one of the medium-sized drums and snapped it crossways into a holder on his workbench. With a swiftness born from routine, he scrawled a message in chalk across the cylinder, one character in each box, turning the entire drum as he reached the end of each line. Finishing, he pulled a small locking rod free from the cylinder, causing the letter-wheels to rotate freely. Having reset the positions of the wheels at random, he replaced the locking rod and recorded a ten-digit number reflecting the new positions of the tumblers.

“No big cipher for this one,” he said. Unplugging the cylinder from his workstation, he stepped out onto the eastern balcony. By the parapet stood the frame holding the massive fireglobe grid, all but one of its orbs cycled

inward toward their bushings—the “off” position. “You might want to shield your eyes,” he said.

Quarra lingered in the doorway and watched Jogan work the signal device. Cycling pulleys, he brought the grid to blazing life. One orange light flashed and then another, beaming far into the deepening darkness of the east. The alert signal sent, Jogan’s hands darted from one control to another, opening and shuttering lights of burning white, gold, orange, and green. She’d learned what they meant once; it had been part of her basic training back home. But only an expert could send signals as fast as an experienced Alanciar semaphore operator. It took Jogan all of five seconds to send the destination code and begin transmitting his missive.

“You’re good.”

“Practice,” he said, barely looking at the drum with the scrambled text for reference. “It’s an awful lot of work just to say that Belmer Kattun has headed off to sleep on the floor of a tavern for a week, and that his relief has arrived.”

“You’re not using my name?”

“No need,” Jogan said, smiling at her even as his hands continued to work the device. “You’re one more anonymous warrior for the Great Cause.”

We may have a different Great Cause this weekend, she said to herself, hoping her blush wouldn’t be noticed in the glare.

Turning back inside, shielded from the searing flashes, she studied the lonely room. What with spotters, signalers, and transcriptionists, most inland signal stations had no fewer than four workers. And many had more, handling traffic in more than one direction. What had begun as an early warning system had become the logistical backbone of the state, conveying everything from weather reports to shipping updates. As decades passed without the expected foe arriving, many in authority had started using the network for personal messages, like those that had passed between her and Jogan. The network had been one of the greatest developments of modern times, but it was under ever more stress, and she expected that any minute the War Cabinet would clamp down.

That’s fine, she thought. *I’m here now*.

“Where does the thoughtcrier work?” she asked.

“Sometimes here. Sometimes on the balcony, or in the yard,” Jogan said, returning from outside. The message finished, he wiped the cylinder clean

with a damp cloth. “There’s a meditation room downstairs with some privacy, but it doesn’t seem to matter to you folks.”

“Right,” she said, remembering. “You can’t use the Force.”

“I like my way of sending messages just fine.” He pointed to the door beside him. “Sunset?”

Somehow, Quarra found herself on the western balcony, high above the thunderous surf. Life was moving without her, now. She wasn’t making decisions anymore, not consciously. Out there, as promised, an orange blaze appeared between the low clouds and the horizon.

“The Coral Banks to the south are even nicer. We’ve got a rowboat—maybe in the morning, you can see.” Jogan appeared next to her holding a bottle and a glass. “From Belmer’s stash.”

He poured for her. “Sorry, there’s only one glass. Belmer drinks from the bottle.” Winking, he did just that.

“So this is what you guys do,” she said. “You sit out here all year, drinking—”

“And writing to married women.”

“—drinking and writing to married women, all while the Great Enemy lurks over the waves.” She sipped and smiled. “I’m a wardmaster, you know. I could report this.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

The sun vanished, and the carpet of clouds erased the remaining sky. Feeling the wind pick up, she sidled closer to the railing where he drank. “You never married?”

“No, and you know this,” he said. “We covered that in message two.”

Quarra chuckled. Her marital status had been introduced only in message twelve. “I suppose it’s hard to think about having a family at the end of the line.”

“The End of the Line,” Jogan said, turning to look at the ocean. “I like it.”

“Sorry—did that offend you?”

“Nothing inferior about being here. This is the *front*,” he said. Grasping her shoulder, he turned her and pointed. “See that buoy out there? That’s the direction the Herald came from, two thousand years ago. Somewhere behind it is the greatest evil Kesh has ever seen. The devil we know. Now, I could be stationed inland, passing along other people’s mundane

messages—or I could be here, telling the world every night that *everything is still all right*.”

“Profound,” she said, finishing her drink. She set the glass on the ledge. “You wrote me that once.” Several times, she recalled. “That’s a good reason to be here.”

He nodded. “Now,” he said, setting down the bottle, “why are *you* here?”

Quarra laughed. “I was drafted, like everyone else!”

“That’s not it.” He turned her away from the view and looked at her with dark, earnest eyes. “What are you doing *here*?”

She stammered, taken aback by the change in his tone. “What—what do you mean?”

“I mean a woman in your position has better things to do than come out and jaw with a lifer in the Signal Corps.”

“I wanted to see the ocean?”

He smiled—but did not laugh.

She exhaled and said the name. “*Brue*.”

“Brue. What does your husband do again? Something with the Training Directorate, I thought.”

“He teaches glassblowing to the elderly.”

“Well, that’s ...”

Quarra looked away as Jogan stopped to recompose his words. “I’m sure he gets a lot out of working with them,” he finished.

“Do headaches count?” Quarra smiled weakly. “Brue hates every minute of it. They’re veterans, and while they’ve all been retired, they still have to do something for the Cause, like we all do. So these cranky people are on the factory line and every single one thinks they outrank him. Which they might not, if Brue had any rank at all ...” Quarra’s voice trailed off.

“Still, he’s putting people to use. All we can do, no?”

“*No*,” she said, shaking her head. “Or yes. It might be all *he* can do—but he’ll never know because he doesn’t try. Brue’s a good father for the kids, and he’s made a decent home in spite of me being busy—”

“But he’s not the man you married anymore.”

“Actually, he is. That’s the problem. In twenty years I’ve gone from supply clerk to thoughtcrier to materials supervisor to wardmaster. Successful wardmasters become mayors. I always end up hating my job, too, but every time, I find a path to something better. But Brue can’t find the

nerve to tell off an old fossil whose authority ended before the Ancient Cataclysm!”

Quarra caught her breath. It was like her messages, but this time there wasn’t a word limit to stop her. She hadn’t wanted to do this, hadn’t wanted to complain about Brue. It wasn’t fair to him, wasn’t what she’d come here to do.

What *had* she come here to do?

“You know,” Jogan said, “it’s not so bad if he’s got the right attitude. Nothing much happens here, but there’s something about being able to tell people things that I like. Every one of my reports from here—it’s a little *story*, if told a sentence at a—”

Jogan didn’t finish the sentence, because Quarra had decided what she had come there to do. He didn’t reject the kiss. Turning him so his back was against the balcony railing, she pressed against him and kissed harder. She felt overwhelming relief to be in this place, doing this, after so many months and so many words. They were done talking.

“Quarra.” The name was soft in the air. He pulled her tighter. She turned his head to brush his cheek with her lips, and opened her eyes to the ocean—
—and saw the giant flying blob, emerging from the fog.

“Jogan!”

The man looked at her in panic, horrified that he’d crossed a line. Seeing her eyes, though, he turned to look in the same direction.

“What in blazes is that?”

The shadowy form became clearer as it approached. Paunchy and rounded, like a raised commissary biscuit—only gigantic, as tall as the signal tower itself. Fluorescent design work gave the shape a snarling, alien face. Something was suspended just beneath the mass: a railed deck, easily the size of one of the canal packet boats. And there was something to the body’s rear on either side, moving back and forth almost organically in the wind. Something was alive over there—Quarra could feel the stirring in the Force—but the overall structure was artificial.

It was an airship.

“There’s two of them,” she called, yanking at Jogan’s vest and pointing.

“No,” he yelled, pointing to the clouds just north of west. *“Three!”*

For a split second, they held each other again, stupefied, both looking out at the vessels. “What do we do?”

"What we're supposed to do," Jogan said. He released her and dashed back inside.

"Wait. What are you doing?"

"That should be an easy answer," he said, grabbing a dust-covered drum sitting alone at the very top of the wooden stand. It was the first cylinder to be inscribed for transmission when the signal station opened, centuries earlier, and it bore only one word, unscrambled, with the source identifier for Point Defiance at the top.

There was no destination code, because the destination was everywhere.

"I haven't sent any flash traffic since the typhoon that fizzled out six years ago," he said, hurrying onto the eastern balcony. "I sure hope they believe me!" Working the pulleys, he looked back to see her still standing in the doorway. "Quarra, what are you waiting for?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're the thoughtcrier," he said. "The semaphore stations will get the news out only so fast. You've got to call out!"

She froze, suddenly realizing where she was—and what she had been doing—when the news came. She'd worked so hard to keep everything secret. Her voice cracked. "But ... I'm not supposed to *be* here!"

"Quarra!"

She had no choice. This was it. This was It, if the pronoun had any meaning in Alanciar. The feeling in the Force was stronger, now. Fouler. *Darker.*

Quarra knew, now, why she was here. Though it wasn't necessary to face the mainland, she turned, shut her eyes, and concentrated hard. Yes, there were minds out there to the populous northeast, waiting to relay her call. One word, the word the Alanciari had feared for two thousand years since the Herald had washed up on an island near their shores.

"*Sith!*"

Chapter Three

Edell Vrai had expected many sensations on seeing land ahead. The one he hadn't planned on was regret.

Twenty-five years of work had gone into this day, the greatest moment in the history of humanity on Kesh. At last, Edell, High Lord of the Tribe and captain of the Sith expedition, had done it. He had discovered the new world—but few were there to see it.

Someone should be recording this, the captain thought. *Too bad we didn't bring a scribe.*

Edell gripped the railing at the gondola's prow and squinted into the eastern night. The telescopes his Keshiri at the construction yards had supplied had been of little use. He'd expected to see more lights on the new continent, as *Omen's* cams had seen in its suicidal plunge to Kesh's surface. But the only sight had been inky shapes rising from the surface, like ribs poking through a shriveled corpse.

"Adjust speed," he called to his crew astern. "We're kilometers away yet. We don't know what the winds on shore will be like."

"Yes, Captain!"

Edell's regrets vanished. *Captain*. The title Yaru Korsin had arrived on Kesh with. There had been no captains of anything among the Sith in two thousand years, no vessels to command larger than the gornyk-shell pontoons farmers ran on the rivers. It had always been assumed that the designer of the method for crossing the sea would have the honor of leading the expedition—but on the near side of fifty, Edell felt fortunate to have finally made it. He'd been a young man when the quest began, after all. Thin and fresh-faced, with neatly coiffed blond hair, he'd been a member of Golden Destiny, the most forward-thinking of the Tribe factions before the Crisis. He liked to think now that he was still a young man: he'd grown into his features, and he cut a dashing figure as the chief engineer of the realm. But in the last decade, he'd despaired of ever reaching his goal. So much had gone wrong.

Distance was the problem. The Keshiri whom Korsin encountered lived on Keshtah, a continent alone in the ocean. That's what the Keshiri described, and that's what the Sith found in their own travels. But their collective knowledge of the map had been limited by something: the stamina of an uvak. As the Neshtovar had before them, the Sith flew many exploratory flights from Keshtah's shores; those who returned had reported sea in every direction, and no islands upon which to alight. Reefs were visible in places not far beneath the waves; perhaps there had even been dry land there at one time. But if any rider had actually crossed the ocean on uvak-back, none had ever reported it. The Sith, of course, knew their world to be round; even the native Keshiri had figured that one out on their own. But it appeared that Keshtah was all there was.

The great map that Grand Lord Korsin kept beneath the Temple had removed not one, but two matters from doubt. There actually was more land, and a lot of it. But the diagram also depicted how far away it was: disappointingly, *desperately* far. The western route was shorter, but it fought the currents. East was the only option.

Now there was a Grand Lord in Tahv again, and Edell had been friendly with him since the older man's time as curator of the palace museum. Varner Hilts wasn't mathematical, but he respected and employed people who were—and as a teenager, Edell had spent many days studying with them the construction techniques of the grand edifices. So as soon as the Restoration had begun, Hilts had charged Edell with solving the transit problem. And solving it *forever*: a single trip wouldn't do. It had to be replicable, and ready

for mass production. The other continent, Korsin had shown, was inhabited. Occupation had to follow discovery.

Years of experiments followed. Boats were out of the question: the jungle forests of Keshtah yielded nothing that would survive the rough waves. Hejarbo plants were plentiful, but their shoots only barely protected Keshiri farmers from rain. They didn't withstand the pressures facing a ship's hull. Vosso and the few other hardwoods from the far interior were too dense to float. Others were too rubbery.

Edell spent the second decade of his work in the study of those materials, hoping to find something that would make the trip possible. Failure heaped upon failure, and many aides grew disgusted with him and became rivals, testing their own plans. Hilts had made him one of the youngest High Lords in history to ensure that he had full access to resources, but Edell had no time for court politics—or family. He refused to yield. His ancestors had crossed the stars. The Force could negate the rules of nature. A true Sith should be able to cross a planetary puddle!

The solution that ultimately struck him was far afield from engineering, and resembled alchemy to his peers. Perhaps it was. The hot seams of the Sessal Spire emitted a variety of noxious gases, including methane. Using glass vessels shaped by Keshiri crafters, Edell and his team trapped methane and used a simple water catalyst to isolate hydrogen, the lightest element known. With a production line set up, Edell developed structures the gas could carry aloft. Again, the Keshiri artisans were up to the task, fashioning an amazingly thin containment fabric that stiffened against pressure. Edell's "rising bell" shape proving the most stable, and he added a gondola crafted from several layers of latticed hejarbo, just strong enough to carry the weight of a crew and their provisions. What would not float on water would float on air.

Three years had passed since he'd gotten that far, and then despair had fallen again. There was no method of controlling direction, exposing the balloons to all the violent whims of the ocean winds. The jet streams here in Kesh's southern hemisphere could provide a mighty assist, but they proved untamed. In the south, a change in the moods of the Sessal Spire and the other volcanoes could send a flier anywhere. Sometimes the southlies carried riders up and up, presumably releasing them to perish upon the mighty polar icepack. And farther north, the equatorial route just sent

riders to a watery death in the doldrums—or so they assumed, for none had ever returned from any of the test flights.

At last, earlier this year, with his enemies protesting against his extravagant expenditures, Edell had had a revelation. The craft didn't need to be smaller, but *larger*. Large enough to support the weight of two or more uvak, suspended in harnesses aft, beneath the keel of the gondola. No uvak could make the crossing under its own power without tiring, but carried aloft, the beasts could rest, be fed, and even sleep when they weren't needed. When they were, their beating wings provided enough propulsion to control direction, provided the pilot tending them sensed the wind patterns properly.

Edell stepped to the gondola's right side and looked back down through the darkness at one of the bleating creatures bobbing in its skeletal yoke. It was as confused as ever about its predicament but flapping its wings on command. "Looks like Starboard's doing his bit," Edell said. "How's Port doing?"

"Port's happy and fed," replied Peppin, the *Candra*'s combination uvak-wrangler and pilot. "Just tell her where you want to go."

The captain smiled. Uvak would indeed take them across the ocean—just not in a way anyone had imagined!

Edell felt the wind picking up as he headed amidships. A salty breeze. They'd been descending, thanks to controlled releases of gas, since they'd spotted land minutes earlier. To the north, he saw the two companion vessels, identical to his, emerging from the clouds. *Good*. His little fleet had made it, every ship.

The *Candra*, the *Lillia*, and the *Dann Itra*. Edell had despaired at the naming of the airships, which honored Grand Lords from around when the Time of the Rot began. It was a recent trend in the thinking of Grand Lord Hilts. Years had been spent renewing the Tribe's connection with its founders; now, their leader felt, it was necessary to rehabilitate other figures from its history. Even those who had, by action or inaction, contributed to the chaos that followed them. In her long-ago tenure, Candra Kitai had been memorable for no other deed than closing the local zoo. And yet here she was, a soapstone facsimile of the woman fastened outside the gondola's hull. The decorations weren't part of Edell's designs for the vessels. If his ship needed to lose weight to gain elevation, the honorable lady Candra would be the first thing to take the plunge.

Tiny red lights appeared on the decks of *Lillia* and *Dann Itra*: lightsabers, flashing on and off. Edell returned the signal. They'd all seen the land and were slowing. Edell didn't really know the other captains who had been appointed—more political nonsense—but they would follow his lead. Their ships, like his, carried ten-person crews: captain, pilot, clairvoyant, and five warriors, plus two Keshiri ambassadors. Familiar purple faces might come in handy if they had to make contact with the natives. But contact wasn't the plan for this trip. Instead, Edell planned an overflight reconnaissance of "Keshtah Major" followed by a return, crossing the relatively small ocean to his homeland's western coast. A larger force already being prepared would follow, once they knew Korsin's map was no fantasy.

That was fine with Edell. Leave the fighting to others; he would take the glory of discovery, sailing *Candra* straight to Tahv, where all his doubters could see him arriving from the sunset.

It was about time.

Seated ahead of the uvak-tender, a dark-skinned woman in her twenties spoke up. "Send the impression, Captain?"

"Do it."

Edell watched as Taymor, one of the more able Sith at thought projection through the Force, concentrated. She wasn't trying to project any more than a feeling at this juncture—the sensation of success, of accomplishment. Distance wasn't necessarily a bar to users of the Force, but no one in the Tribe had ever tried to send a message around the world before. They'd keep to simple emotions now. There'd be time to experiment with more, later.

"Done," Taymor said, smirking as if to remind the others that she'd just done something unprecedented for the Tribe on Kesh.

Edell rolled his eyes and returned to the prow. This was how it was with the Sith. Every gathering, no matter how small, became a talent show. He suddenly respected Yaru Korsin a lot more. Starships must have been nightmares to run. No wonder *Omen* had a private cabin for the captain. Edell had wished for one several times on the voyage already.

Something *Candra* also lacked was a good forward observation post, he thought again as he reached for one of the sturdily wound leather cables connecting the gondola to the gas envelope. It wasn't a problem for a daring Sith willing to shimmy up, as he was, but he had already added it to his mental list of design needs for the future.

Gloved hands on the cord, he started pulling himself up—only to be interrupted by a call from behind. “Captain!”

Edell looked back in the dark to see Taymor frowning. “What now?”

“There’s a lot going on here,” the telepath said, fingers splayed around her temples. “In this place. A lot of emotions. A lot of energy.” Her brow furrowed.

The captain chortled. “You’re just reading *us*, Taymor.”

“No, High Lord. It’s out *there*.” She pointed ahead.

Edell squinted. “I don’t know what you mean.” He climbed the cable and looked forward. The lumps in the east were more than islands—the tips of long peninsulas, with harbors between. Structures were visible atop various promontories, straight lines in the milky blackness. Leaning outward and craning his neck, he saw tiny multicolored lights peeking through the haze that covered the inland regions. The lights flickered, changed, and went out.

Where are the bright cities Yaru Korsin wrote about? Swaying in the wind, Edell tried to focus through the Force, to see if he could feel anything Taymor had. He sensed only tension, apprehension, anticipation, and excitement—all of which could have been coming as easily from his lusty Sith shipmates as from anywhere else.

He looked back to his crew. “We don’t have anything to worry—”

Kra-koouoom! At once a flash appeared over his shoulder. In the sky a kilometer to the north, *Lillia* exploded!

Momentarily blinded, Edell nearly lost his grip on the cable. Catching himself, the captain twisted around and struggled to focus his eyes. *Lillia*’s gas envelope had been completely replaced by a burgeoning blossom of flames—and her gondola was nowhere to be seen.

“All stop!”

Also to port but nearer to *Candra*, *Dann Itra* wobbled and turned. Edell felt a lurch, too, as *Candra*’s steering uvak decided they wanted to be anywhere else. “Peppin, get control of those animals!”

The airship quaked. Edell’s shipmates rose from their positions, some seeking to help the navigator, others gawking at the blast, which had now resolved itself into a hot ashen shower, peppering the ocean far below. Edell’s mind raced.

“It’s just lightning!” he yelled. Everyone knew how volatile hydrogen was; danger from electrical charge was always a risk. He thought back on the wind he’d felt. There was no obvious storm brewing, but maybe this had to do

with the approaching land, and the weather here. It was why they'd brought three ships. Breathing deeply, he felt better for a moment—

—until he looked down again and saw the bright, blazing missile lancing upward from the land. Three meters long, its head afire, the black javelin arced toward *Dann Itra*.

Kra-kooom! Edell closed his eyes this time, but the superheated shock wave threw him from his perch. The High Lord slammed awkwardly to the deck, his right knee smashing straight through the top level of hejarbo flooring.

Candra spun now, straining the cables connecting the gondola to the balloon. As Edell struggled to right himself, he heard the uvak scream. No, not *Candra's* uvak, he saw as he reached the railing. In the sky below, *Dann Itra's* damaged gondola tumbled violently downward, end-over-end, followed almost gently through the furious cloud by a rent portion of the canvas envelope. Edell clambered halfway across the railing, screaming through the Force for *Dann Itra's* occupants to bail out—only to see another pike fired from the ground strike the flailing wreckage midair, shattering it to bits.

Sensing the deaths of his fellow Sith, Edell felt something else. The Force had been used against him! Such precision firing? It was the only way. But whoever heard of Force-using Keshiri?

“Captain! They’re firing at *us* now!”

Below, the air itself seemed to scream. The captain clutched the railing and swore. It was indeed a historic moment. Like Yaru Korsin, Edell Vrai and his Sith had made first contact with the natives of a new continent.

But this time, the natives were stronger!

Chapter Four

Snap-krack! The massive ballista on Point Vigilance fired again, its mechanical recoil echoing across the harbor to the signal station on Defiance.

“Yes! Yes!” Jogan yelled from the station tower, leaping in place. His excitement rattled the northern balcony more than the explosions had. “Get ‘em!”

Quarra sagged against the railing, mystified at the scene to the northwest. A rancid haze high aloft was the only clue to the previous existence of the first airship. The second had left a bilious pillar of smoke, twisting downward as it chased its unhappy payload.

Sith. Sith! Quarra cursed herself for failing to sense their evil approaching. Her job, her whole civilization, was about staying alert, and she’d let herself become preoccupied. Her fault! But then, who had known what to look for, anyway? No one alive on Alanciar had ever been touched by Sith evil. Not until a few minutes earlier, when she had opened her mind to send the warning message to the mainland. She’d felt them then: writhing tendrils of

darkness, reaching into the night, supremely confident of her inferiority—and of their ultimate success.

“*Success.*” She’d almost felt the word, curdling in an alien mouth.

Two of the airships had fallen after that, but who knew how many more the Sith had? Who knew they had them at all? Airships weren’t mentioned in the *Keshtab Chronicles*, the tome that said all that had ever been known about the dark side of the world. If the Sith had airships, why hadn’t they used them before? Were they new? Was this a test?

If it was, the forces of Alanciar were passing it. Over the waters, another weapon fired, hurling a whistling cloud into the night. “That’s right! That’s right!” Jogan hooted. “Take *that* back home with you!”

Quarra looked up suddenly. “*Home!*” She bolted back inside the belfry.

Immediately she slammed into something painfully solid. They’d doused the few glowlights in the belfry, as per general orders, but she’d forgotten where Jogan’s workbench was. Now it was on *her*—or she was on it. Quarra rolled, struggling to untangle her leg. Jogan’s styluses tumbled from their holders, clattering onto the floor beside her. She swore, but her voice was lost in the sound of another launch from the opposite coast.

Outside, Jogan cheered. “Blast it! *Blast it!*”

Quarra thought the same words. She ground her teeth and kicked the table free. Turning, she scrambled over the fallen goods and stumbled toward the staircase.

“Quarra, you’ve got to see this!”

Poking his head inside, Jogan saw her vanish into the black hole of the stairwell.

“*Quarra?*”

The gondola quaked in the darkness. “Hurry, fools!”

All the occupants of *Candra* were moving now, hurling provisions over the side in a desperate attempt to put some elevation between the airship and the ballistae below. The fortification overlooking the harbor fairly bristled with weapons, Edell saw—but they had a limited range. To avoid a fiery fate, a Sith could starve a little.

But the Tribe had to know what lurked here. “Taymor! Send the alarm!”

Glancing aft, Edell saw the telepath kneel. There was no concentrating here, not with *Candra* buffeting so violently against the crazed uvak’s exertions. The woman steadied herself against the gondola frame with one

hand—and screamed as white geysers seemed to erupt from beneath her feet, tearing woman and hejarbo flooring to pieces.

Edell goggled as Taymor fell. With *Candra* lurching again, he leapt across the new gaping hole in the flooring to land at the side of what was left of the clairvoyant. There was no saving Taymor, he saw—her body was lacerated with dozens of shining stones. He gawked as he recognized the projectiles.

Diamonds!

An uvak screeched past, soaring upward into the night sky behind *Candra*. Edell thought one of his own wailing creatures had gotten loose—until the uvak seemingly wheeled in midair and turned in pursuit. There was no mistaking: it was the source of the fatal shots. And now as it approached, Edell could see through the murk a Keshiri rider, propping a long tube on his shoulder.

“Look out!”

As Edell dived back over the opening, a mechanical *snap* sounded from behind. A cloud of shining stones arced upward—some nuggets punching through the rear of the gondola, others whizzing out of sight above. Beneath, *Candra*’s own uvak, who had never stopped screaming, went abruptly silent.

The captain watched as the attacker soared ahead to be joined by two others, similarly armed. Edell’s eyes widened. The Keshiri had an air force!

* * *

Quarra missed every other step heading down before finally leaping over the railing into the darkness. Landing safely on the floor of the tower—at least the Force had been helpful to her in that—she darted into the kitchen, not even remembering what she was looking for.

Jogan clambered quickly down the steps. “Quarra!”

“I’ve got to go,” she said as she dashed heedlessly from room to room. “Where’s my pack? I need my pack!”

Jogan watched, puzzled, from his perch on the stairs as she charged past in a frenzy. He pointed toward the floor in front of the bedroom doors.

Fumbling in the dark for the bag, Quarra lifted. Fabric tore loudly as she caught the string of the duffel underfoot, and she fell to the floor again with a muffled *thud*. Clothing spilled from the ripped bag.

Another clamor from outside. Jogan looked up into the heights, torn between watching the destruction of the ancient invaders and a harried woman scrambling in the dark to recover her laundry. He didn't wait long to decide. Hopping off the staircase, he found her on her hands and knees, futilely stuffing items into a bag that no longer was. He knelt behind her.

"Quarra, you don't have to go anywhere! We've sent our messages. We're safe here."

"*You're* safe here," she said, clawing for the last of her wayward underthings. Looking left, she found it—in the bemused signal officer's hand. "I'm not safe here—because I'm not here!"

Jogan gave her a blank look. "What do you mean?"

She ripped the garment from his hand. "My husband thinks I'm touring the Northern Slope right now!"

"I don't get out much. Is that what they call what we were doing?"

She returned a glare that assured him she was not amused. Outside, another wooden *crack* told of more woe for the invading Sith.

He watched as she folded over what was left of the pouch. "But you said Brue's not in the military," he said. "I don't think he'll find out."

Clutching her belongings between her arm and torso, Quarra whirled and grabbed Jogan's hands. She spoke urgently. "Jogan, meeting you is one of the best things that's ever happened to me. You're a very hopeful and trusting person," she said. She turned his hands over and clutched them more tightly. "But that out there is *the biggest thing that has ever happened*, and you and I were out on the balcony watching it! I was the one who sent the thoughtsignal!"

She dropped his hands and stood. "There are going to be a *lot* of people here soon," she said, gesticulating wildly. "And everyone on Kesh will know who was here when the Sith came. I can't *be* here!"

"It's history—"

"*Keep it!*"

Jogan stood. "Quarra, if the state dispatched you, they already *know* you're here—"

"That's just it. They *didn't* send me." She barged past him toward the door. Lit from behind by the low light from outside, she looked back at him plaintively. "I wrote the letter of transit here myself. I borrowed the travel supervisor's seal to stamp it!"

"You can do that?"

“Not really! It helps that he’s seventy-seven, and too well connected to be sent to work in ... I don’t know, a glass factory!”

“There wasn’t a relief order for Belmer?”

Belmer! Her mind raced. No, she hadn’t told her name to Belmer, the thoughtcrier. He would be heading back here now, too—unless the forces at Garrow’s Neck stopped him. She thought back on the captain and his gunners. Did he remember her name? They, too, should be marching up the trail any minute. How was she supposed to get past them? “I’ve got to go!” She ran through the doorway.

“Rising bell damaged!”

Peppin’s warning was no surprise to Edell. Hydrogen hissed from punctures in the gas bag. *Not good*, he thought, though at least the attackers buzzing around—there were three now—didn’t have the fire-tipped javelins that had killed their companions. But *Candra* was descending again, soon to be back within range of the ballisteers. There was no choice. They had to deflate the balloon—before someone else did.

Edell forced his way forward. There was a hawser dangling there somewhere, pitching in the dark, which would vent the envelopes in an orderly manner—if he got the time. Outside, the uvak-riders turned for another pass.

“Warriors port and starboard! Prepare to deflect fire,” he yelled. “No lightsabers—use the Force!” This was no time to learn whether igniting a lightsaber would touch off an explosion.

Two uvak converged from either side, their riders unleashing a hail of shining pellets into the night. But even as the Sith warriors gestured to block the spray, the third uvak-rider made his appearance—diving headlong toward the gondola.

The forward section sundered under the brunt of the suicidal attack, smashing the graven image of Candra Kitai backward along with the rest of the prow. Two crew members died instantly from the impact. Edell seized a railing amidships just as the forward cables snapped. What remained of the gondola flipped downward, held to the sighing balloon only by the rear supports. Another warrior and an unanchored Keshiri ambassador disappeared into the darkness.

What remained of *Candra* hurtled downward, the balloon slinging its hostages violently beneath it. Edell saw faces spinning above him, all

clinging desperately to the scraps. Below, the dark harbor yawned wide, as if to devour them. From beyond, he heard the telltale whistles start again, growing more shrill by the second. He screamed for his crew to fall free from the ship—and finally let go himself, surrendering his dream to an eruption of heat and light.

As the surf crashed around the southernmost peninsula, chaos continued to rage to the north. Every launcher on the Six Claws fired wildly into the sky, searching for the last airship. Jogan stood in the open gate, holding his repeating ballista in two hands. A hefty construct of ossified wood and elastic bands under high tension, it was standard issue for the front.

But while the long-awaited war was finally going on across the harbor to the north, Quarra was wandering the knoll looking every which way. Her torn bag sat on the ground, unattended.

“Quarra, what’s wrong?” Jogan asked, striding over.

“My muntok,” she said, waving a stretch of leather cord. “Blasted thing chewed through its tether and ran off!”

Jogan knelt and looked at the tracks in the purple sand. “The explosions spooked it. Can you call it?”

“I would if I knew its name. I checked it out at the corral in Tandry!”

“You didn’t get its name?”

“I was only going to have it for a while. Do you get to know rental muntoks?”

Jogan looked at her in bafflement. “And your job is to keep Uhrar organized?”

“Sorry, it’s my first affair!”

Quarra turned to further argue the point—only to sense a stirring in the Force. Feeling the shadow fall across Jogan before she saw it, she reached out to shove him telekinetically.

Too late! An organic mass slammed into the sandy slope, flailing as it struck the surface. Thrown to the ground by the impact, Quarra stumbled—and looked straight into the lifeless green eye of a behemoth.

“An uvak!” she yelled, struggling to get to her feet. She reached through the darkness, feeling her way around the creature. “Jogan! Are you all right?”

Over her shoulder to the northeast, the last remaining balloon exploded thunderously over the harbor. Quarra paid no mind, feeling around the

mammoth corpse until she found Jogan, his frame pinned under the creature's weighty tail.

Violet face lit by the detonation, Jogan looked up in a daze, blood trickling from his lips. "I think I found your animal," he said, between coughs. "But I thought ... you said you rented a *muntok* ... not an *wak* ..."

Chapter Five

The clouds broke, and the sun again mirrored through the glass spires of Tabv. Edell scaled the marble steps to the capital—alone. No escort had greeted him; no parade marked his arrival.

Inside, in the atrium where three great factions had battled a quarter century earlier, Edell found the Tribe working in unison. Sith Lords and Sabers huddled over a replica of Korsin's secret map, set up as one enormous table in the middle of the room. Edell had looked on it many times in planning his journey—a journey now completed.

"My Lords and Sabers, I have returned!" he said. No one stirred at the table. He called again—and again.

Finally, the Lords dispatched an underling. Not even an apprentice, but a mere Tyro, a third Edell's age. The youngling sneered. "What do you want?"

"I have news," Edell said, straightening. "I've been to the new continent, and returned in triumph."

"How did you triumph, exactly?"

"I got us there. I proved it existed."

"Old news," the boy said, still sneering. "The conquest is well under way."

A gap opened between the Lords standing with their backs to him. Edell saw through the opening that the map table was populated with dozens of markers signifying Sith forces and the airships that brought them.

Edell's brow furrowed. "I didn't expect you to invade so quickly."

The Tyro said nothing.

"Very well," Edell said, stepping forward. "I'm prepared to advise—"

"No." The Tyro ignited a lightsaber, blocking his way. Ahead, the gap between the planners closed so Edell could no longer see the table.

He protested. "I belong here. I confirmed the continent existed!"

"So? Someone would have done it."

"I invented the airships!"

"Which we can build without you."

"But I am High Lord of the Tribe of the Sith—"

"A true Sith would have done something," the Tyro said, "not merely look around. You're a tinkerer, no more." Two hulking guards, previously unseen, grabbed Edell from behind. "Throw him out. He doesn't belong here."

Edell gasped and opened his eyes to the night. Clutching the wet sands, he heaved seawater from his lungs.

How long had he been out, he wondered, to dream? It felt like a long time—but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Looking west along the jagged coastline, he saw four of his companions similarly beached and scrambling from the harbor. A kilometer to the northeast, the remains of *Candra* still blazed on the water. Unseen, he and his party had dropped due north of the signal station; the balloon had carried the wreckage of the gondola farther east. Squinting, he saw uvak buzzing over the remains, while lights moved on the northern shore across the harbor.

They don't know we're over here yet, he thought. We have a chance.

Edell stood rockily. Bruised and waterlogged but otherwise unhurt, he staggered up the shoreline to meet the others who had survived. Peppin, the uvak-tender; Ulbrick and Janns, two of the warriors; and one of the Keshiri, whose name didn't matter. With Edell, they were five. Was this all that remained, from an expedition of thirty?

"Climb!" he said, pointing up a stony tumbledown. Above, atop the western summit, sat a tall white tower ringed by a high wall. Shelter, or more enemies? He didn't know—but the compound was much smaller than the one on the northern peninsula, and if anyone had fired missiles from here,

they weren't doing it now. "Don't use the lightsabers," he whispered. Darkness was ever the Sith's friend—but particularly now.

The warriors reached the top of the rise first. Edell heard a loud *snap*. "High Lord!"

Edell scrambled up to see Ulbrick on the ground, clutching a gushing thigh wound. Meters ahead, a uniformed Keshiri woman crouched behind the corpse of an uvak and fired glistening shards from an exotic weapon. The shots just missed Janns, who dived for cover behind a ruined hut. Edell heard the projectiles shatter on impact. *Glass*, he realized, like little shikkar blades. And even more dangerous, as Ulbrick's moan attested.

The woman spotted Edell and turned her weapon on him. The High Lord leapt just in time. How many more bolts were in that compartment? He didn't want to find out. Hitting the ground, he cupped his hand and ripped at the surface through the Force, returning the Keshiri's fire with a spray of sand. The woman was ready for that, but her weapon refused to fire again. Edell went for the shikkar he kept in his belt—

—only to be punched violently by an unseen power. Edell's knees buckled underneath him, and he fell backward, dropping the blade. The woman was on it in half a second, grabbing the weapon and lunging. He caught her arm as she pressed it down—and saw her eyes. Wider and set farther apart than any Keshiri eyes he'd ever seen, and full of an angry fear.

Drawing strength from her emotions, Edell heaved mightily. The woman tumbled backward, losing her grip on the dagger. When she landed, she found Peppin and Janns looming overhead. Gloved Sith hands grabbed at her, wrestling her to the ground.

Reaching his feet, Edell looked at their attacker. The Keshiri woman looked to be about his age. She wore a vest wrought of a leather he'd never seen before, almost an armor. The dead uvak behind her he recognized as unlucky Starboard, from the *Candra*—and near him lay an incapacitated male Keshiri, dressed as the woman was except for an overcoat half swaddled around his body.

Edell looked up to the tower, beyond the wall. Had anyone seen the melee? He signaled to his surviving Keshiri ambassador to see to Ulbrick. "I'll deal with this one," he said, recovering his shikkar and stepping toward the injured male.

"Don't touch him, you filthy Sith!"

All gawked at their conscious prisoner. Edell stammered, “W-what did you say?”

Struggling against her captors, the woman spoke again. “I said, don’t touch him, you—”

“I heard what you said,” Edell said, motioning for Peppin to cover the Keshiri’s mouth. “I’m just surprised to hear you say it.” No one had known what language to expect from the natives of the hidden continent. The best that he’d hoped for was an ancient Keshiri dialect, had there been some prehistoric interchange between the cultures; his ambassador was familiar with several variants. But what she was speaking, heavily accented as it was, was the language that the crew of *Omen* had brought to Kesh!

Calming down, the silver-haired woman looked up at Peppin and spoke in that language again. “*You want to release me.*”

Peppin did a double take. “Oh, don’t tell me—”

“Yes,” Edell said, golden eyes filling with wonder. “I was right. I thought it on the ocean—and again when I saw her fight. These Keshiri know how to use the Force. Or at least this one does.” He looked back at the bizarre wooden gun lying in the sand. “They have several secret weapons.”

“We prepared for you,” the prisoner said, pinned to the ground.

“Prepared for us? How do you even know of us?” Edell looked through the darkness at the compound wall. “Who else is here?”

“A whole detachment!”

Edell snorted. “A lie.”

Finally, a break. The Keshiri here may have use of the Force, but this woman didn’t have much built up in the way of mental defenses. That boded well. “Your name is ... Quarra, I think. And you’re alone.”

Quarra glowered at him—and trembled. To the side, her male Keshiri companion coughed, waking up. Her eyes darted in his direction.

“You don’t want him to die,” Edell said. “Fine. I can use that. Take them both inside the tower, quickly.”

“Careful with him,” Quarra said. “Your blasted uvak landed on him and broke his ribs!”

“You brought the creature down on yourselves.” He cracked his knuckles. “You’re about to bring a lot more down on you.”

“I don’t think so,” Quarra said as she was jerked upright by her captors. “You saw what happened out there! You’ll never get past our defenses.”

“Oh, I think we will.” Edell pointed to the opening in the compound wall. “You left the gate open for us, you see?”

It would take two to bring in the bulky injured native, Edell saw. He suddenly remembered his own injured warrior. In the shadows of the structure, Quarra’s victim slumped woozily against the shoulder of Edell’s Keshiri flunky. A makeshift bandage around Ulbrick’s right leg was completely saturated with blood.

“What’s his condition ... whatever your name is?”

“I am Tellpah, high one,” the Keshiri scholar responded. “Saber Ulbrick has many splinters in his leg.”

“We may have to move quickly. Can he walk?”

Ulbrick gritted his teeth in pain. “Not easily, High Lord,” the young Sith said. “I don’t think so.”

Edell looked at the warrior and then back at Quarra. He smiled at her—and spun, igniting his lightsaber and decapitating Ulbrick with a crimson flash. Tellpah avoided the stroke that wasn’t meant for him, but the Keshiri aide couldn’t avoid the mess.

“Hide the body,” Edell ordered, deactivating his weapon. This spot was sheltered from sight of the harbor, so no one had been able to see the act—other than his intended audience.

Quarra sputtered in horror. “He was one of your own!”

“Yes,” Edell said mildly as he passed through the gate. “Don’t forget that.” He looked back at his remaining trio of companions. “Put the male downstairs in the tower. I’m going to the top to have a look around.”

“Others will be here soon,” Peppin said.

“Then we do it quickly,” he said. “We have to know what’s about. Bind the woman—and bring her upstairs, too. She may be able to tell me what I’m looking at!”

A lightsaber!

Bound and sitting against Jogan’s overturned workbench, Quarra stole glances at the Sith leader rummaging in the belfry—and at the stubby weapon attached to his belt, gently reflecting the light from the glow lamp he carried. Lightsabers had been described in the *Keshtab Chronicles*, and there was even a rumor that one existed in Alanciar, brought there by the Herald, long ago. If such a thing was, it sat in the most secret archives of the land, buried underground beside the War Cabinet’s forward headquarters in

Sus'mintri. She wondered if the relic still worked, as the human's weapon had. A magical pillar of energy, which did not fall apart on striking something.

Surely the Sith were the Destructors of legend. Or their minions. Or their creations.

The *Chronicles* had also described humans, but nothing could have prepared her for the differences among humans. Such variety in skin tones and hair color, compared with the purple-complected Keshiri. It was hard to believe Edell, with his sun-colored hair, belonged to the same species as the female Peppin and her shocking red mane. They weren't unattractive as monsters went, but the *Chronicles* had warned the Alanciari about that fact, too.

The Sith leader loomed impatiently over his assistant. "Have you found anything, Tellpah?"

"No, High Lord," the older male replied, sifting notes on the floor not far from where she sat. Tellpah unnerved Quarra most of all. He was Keshiri, and yet not quite, with a lower forehead and a slightly narrower face. Not a distant branch of the Keshiri tree, but one removed from hers. Had the humans all come from different places, to look so distinct?

And why would a Keshiri be here, helping the Sith that enslaved him?

She whispered. "You don't have to obey them, Tellpah. Keshiri here are free!"

Tellpah looked at her blankly, uncomprehending.

"Ignore her," Edell barked. "I need to know the proper signal to send!"

Quarra smirked. On reaching the belfry, Edell had gone from balcony to balcony, studying the nighttime scene outside. It had clearly unnerved him. Only ocean blackness to the west and south; armed searchers on the harbor to the north. And along the peninsula to the east, troops were mustering outside the gates of the fortress at Garrow's Neck, preparing to head up the trail toward them. From what the Sith said, the fireglobes had been lit there and at all the fortresses to the north, to aid the scouring forces. *A good sign*, she thought. The Alanciari were no longer afraid of more airships coming in, and were mopping up.

The only thing that had seemed to go the Sith leader's way was the arrival of two more humans, warriors evidently cast out from the airship just as he was. They'd emerged, uninjured, from the harbor near the western tip of

Point Defiance, and brought his number up to six. But if he wanted to prevent the arrival of the troops from the east, his time was running out.

"The signal, Tellpah! The signal!"

"I told you before, I know the all-clear code," Quarra piped up.

Standing outside by the signal apparatus, Edell looked in at her and sneered. "I don't think I'd trust the signal *you'd* send."

"Your choice," she said. He'd brought her upstairs thinking that by having Jogan in his power, he'd get her cooperation. But even with his leverage, the Sith were nothing if not suspicious, she saw.

Edell stomped back into the belfry and stared angrily at the stand with the signal cylinders. In an outburst of Force power, he smashed it against the stone wall.

Good, she thought. He's cracking.

"I am *not*," he said, turning to face the south. Through the open doorway, he saw something far on the horizon. He quickly stepped out. "Tellpah, over here. You see what I see?"

The Keshiri slave joined his master at the ledge. "A ship, sir!"

Quarra winced. Only Shore Guard vessels worked the western sea, but the harvester fleet worked the coral banks in the Southern Passage. Dropping massive stone kedges to fight the fast current, the ships and their divers went out for weeks at a time. They weren't supposed to work this far west, she knew—but captains behind on harvesting their quotas of seafood were known to cut corners.

"It's good," Edell said, pointing southeast. "You see where it is? I bet they can't see the signal tower on that fortress near us at all." He slapped Tellpah on the shoulder. "Quickly, let's go. Get her downstairs!"

Forcing Quarra up, the slave tightened the cord binding her wrists behind her back and pushed her ahead. Quarra looked down into the gaping maw of the stairwell—and saw an opportunity. It would be easy to step off and plunge to her death. It was, in horrible fact, her responsibility now. No Alanciari could assist the Sith in their invasion plans. She'd already given too much away, just by opening her mouth. She took a step into the air, her boot hovering over the emptiness. Something had to be done—

No. She thought of her children at home—and of Jogan, hurt and perhaps dying downstairs. No, there had to be a reason she'd been drawn here now, of all times. And there was hope. Troops were coming. Her marriage might not survive their arrival, but neither would the murderous humans. Newly

determined, she tromped down the stairs, followed by Tellpah and his master.

The recently arrived warriors emerged from the basement, arms laden with books and scrolls, just as Jogan had been. “Archives, High Lord!”

“Out here?” Edell regarded the parchment stash. “Bring them. They could be of use.”

Quarra barely stifled a laugh. She imagined what was in Jogan’s library. Half of them were probably adventure stories or romances. Suddenly reminded, she looked to the side. From his living quarters, Jogan groaned.

Edell shoved her toward Jogan’s room. “Don’t get comfortable.”

Jogan certainly wasn’t comfortable, she saw. The Sith had dumped him on the floor, completely ignoring his bed. But there was more color in his face now. He’d slipped into shock when the uvak struck him; it had taken all her Force skills to keep him alive. She knelt beside him. With her hands tied behind her, all she could do was kiss his bruised cheek.

Groggily, Jogan recognized her. “This is not how I imagined getting you into my bedroom,” he said, slurring his words.

“Hush, now.”

Jogan heard the alien voices outside and tried to rise, fighting the pain. She nudged him back down. He puffed, spent from the effort. “Are those ... the Sith?”

“Yes,” she whispered, caressing the side of his face with hers. “But they’re not happy right now. We just have to wait—”

“No more waiting,” said Edell, standing in the doorway above them. He smirked. “A shame to interrupt such a loving pair. But we found your boat outside. We’re about to take another trip—*all of us!*”

Chapter Six

The clouds broke, and the sun again mirrored through the glass spires of Tahv.

“I can’t see a cursed thing,” the old man said, shielding his eyes. “All this blasted glass wasn’t such a good idea!”

“Yes, Grand Lord.” A solemn Keshiri clapped her hands, and another aide pulled a silken cord. On the roof of the capitol building, workers on standby lowered dark curtains over the stained-glass windows of the atrium dome.

“Too hot in here,” their master growled, wiping nonexistent sweat from his ragged brow. “I’m going to my office.”

“Yes, Grand Lord.” The attendants bearing the fans stepped back into the alcoves, allowing him to pass. Varner Hilts, supreme leader of the Lost Tribe of the Sith on Kesh, was heading back to the little room where he’d spent half his life. And why not? He was still Caretaker as well as Grand Lord. The room was his—as *all* rooms were now. If he wanted to sit in front of an old desk buried under ancient texts and sip his brew, he could.

Lately, all he'd wanted was privacy. His major responsibilities, as he saw them, were long since discharged. He'd returned the Tribe to stability and restored the building he'd loved to its former splendor. The rest was trivial. The octogenarian had lost interest in the day-to-day running of the Tribe, and in the great mission he had set his people upon twenty-five years earlier. There were others to handle those things.

His consort, Iliana, still robust at forty-nine, had her hands full managing politics. The Caretaker Grand Lord was still a revered figure for most, but among the Sith, even a loaf of bread would develop enemies if placed upon a throne. No one had been so irreverent as to challenge him directly, but Hilts wasn't so naïve as to think he'd always be given a pass. Though if he got any older, he probably wouldn't be able to tell the blade that struck him from any of his other pains.

But those in power are the makers of traditions—and there, Hilts found the unique opportunity that got him up in the mornings. A quarter century had passed since the last reading of Yaru Korsin's Testament in Tahv, and it was time for it again. But with the destruction of the ancient recording device, the spectral Korsin would never again deliver the message aloud. Despite the damage to the archives during the horrible riots of the Great Crisis, the text of the Testament still existed. The libraries in Orreg and Elvarnos had escaped total destruction, and if nothing else Hilts knew the speech by heart. But that same heart—still reasonably strong, after all these years—told him that Korsin's dying message was no longer appropriate to the moment, and for his people.

So Hilts and a team of scribes had set to work on a new speech. Part manifesto, reminding listeners of what it meant to be Sith; part legal document, restating the hierarchy of High Lords, Lords, and Sabers and reaffirming the practices surrounding succession. But the meat of the message, and the thing that excited the aged ruler most, was a section recounting the lineage of the humans of Kesh, all the way back to the Tapani members of House Nidantha. For Hilts, it represented his crowning achievement, beyond even his Grand Lordship.

Soon after the Hilts Restoration began, he and other researchers had started to place everything they'd recently uncovered in context, from the fragmented orders of Naga Sadow to Takara Korsin's missive to her son. There had always been puzzling references in the ancient writings from the original *Omen* survivors; now they all made sense. The humans of the Tribe

were important in the galactic scheme—and, shockingly, they were a people far older than the Sith movement itself.

Through the styluses of Keshiri writers more eloquent than he, what had been a simple recounting of events became poetry calculated to instill the Tribe with pride. Blocked from supremacy in the Tapani sector, the members of House Nidantha had struck out to find a new, greater destiny on their own—only to become trapped and enslaved by the Sith of the Stygian Caldera. But the Tribe’s ancestors would not be kept low, especially not after they learned the empowering philosophies of the Sith and the workings of the dark side of the Force. Yes, the *Omen* crew’s arrival on Kesh had been every bit as accidental as their Tapani forebears’ arrival in Sith space—but there *were* no accidents. The first years of the Tribe on Kesh had been, in effect, a do-over, in which the *humans* became the rulers and slavers—and in which the Red Sith were quickly and rightfully extinguished. If only the Tapani refugees had already known the Force when they arrived in the Stygian Caldera. How different history might have been!

No matter: the Tribe was making its *own* history now. Whatever had become of Naga Sadow and his kind during the last two thousand years, the people that would eventually leave Kesh would be independent. A new Sith, born of an old people. Hilts had been tempted to use his True Testament to publicly dub the Tribe members *Nidanthans*, but he’d thought better of it. They may have started out as part of an interstellar trading house, but their identity now was in what they’d done since arriving.

Years earlier, the *Lost Tribe* term had carried the ring of failure. Now the words reminded all of what they had already achieved. In becoming lost, the Tribe had found so much more.

“It’s good,” Hilts said, parchment crackling in his pale hands. “Good enough.” He set the pages down atop the only level spot. *Too bad you couldn’t be here for this, Jaye. You always liked my stories.*

“Varner, you look like the wrong end of an uvak!”

“Eh?”

“I don’t understand,” Iliana Hilts said, billowing in. Wearing a satiny gown laden with gems, the redhead pinched his cheeks and frowned. “We bring in the best skin specialists for you—”

“I banished them from the realm,” he said, rubbing his jaw. “They kept wanting to plant trees in my pores.”

"It's an organic poultice, Varner. They're experts. They groom all the best people."

"Well, now they're grooming icebergs."

Shoving his head down, she straightened his collar. "Does the irascible-ruler routine amuse the Keshiri? Because it doesn't work with me."

"Nothing works with you, my dear." He grinned up at her through ceramic teeth. "It's one of the truths on which I depend."

He never could tell whether Iliana loved him or hated him. But after all these years, it didn't really matter. They *worked*. He doubted many couples on Kesh could say the same. Sure, it had taken the threat of death to wake them to a common interest. He couldn't fight for himself, and as consort, she would be allowed to live only while he stayed alive. But maybe that was what Sith relationships required.

"Get up," she said, yanking his rickety chair backward so fast he nearly fell from it. "You're needed in the throne room."

"Again? I'd rather lick the floor." He gestured to the almost-finished tract on the desk. "I'm needed *here*. This is where I can be effective."

Iliana sighed. "More words." Shoving her hands under his arms, she forced him to stand. "They're all you're about. You were always a poor Sith. Where's your anger, your envy?"

"I grow angry every time I look in the mirror—and I envy every time I see someone shy of seventy."

She straightened his tunic and bit her lip. "This will have to do. The High Lord Korsin Bentado is requesting an audience."

Hilts groaned. "I knew I'd lived too long." He stared forlornly at the parchment. He'd never get done at this rate. "Just send him away."

"Nothing would make me happier," Iliana said, rolling her eyes. "But you put him in charge of the invasion force."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I told you to. A Bentado who's busy is better than a Bentado wandering around, finding cults to start." She shrugged. "But mostly, because I told you to."

"*Bentado*," he said sullenly. The man made his sides hurt. "Edell Vrai, now, there's a smart man."

"And you sent him on the expedition, Varner," she said, prodding him toward the door. "Now, come on. I do everything else around here, but I'm not doing this!"

* * *

“Blessings of the dark side to your family, Grand Lord,” Korsin Bentado said.

Sitting in the captain’s chair from *Omen*, Hilts mumbled an inaudible response. *Did the dark side bless things? Imbecile.*

“As always, it is an honor to visit this place, this holiest of holies in Tahv,” Bentado said, gesturing around the throne room with his one remaining hand. Yaru Korsin had died before he could ever hold court here, and the long, high-ceilinged room had remained closed until Hilts reopened it. Bentado rattled on. “I stared in wonder outside, before the new glass spires. It proves what I’ve said. The Hilts Restoration only *begins* on Kesh. But it reaches to the stars, where *you* will someday restore us all to our rightful place of dominance!”

“Okay.”

High Lord Bentado strutted before eight Sith warriors, all dressed as he was in black leather. Well into his fifties, Bentado looked just as he had in his youth, bald with bushy black facial hair. Hilts suspected he’d had a lot of work done by Iliana’s “specialists.” *What kind of man dyes his eyebrows?*

“The news we’ve been waiting years for has arrived at last,” Bentado declared. “*Squab!*”

Bentado faced the great doors, where a hunchbacked Keshiri entered bearing a note. Standing just behind the Grand Lord, Iliana rolled her eyes. “Well,” she whispered in her husband’s shriveled ear, “now we know why it took years to get here.”

“Hush,” Hilts replied, trying not to laugh. It had been their private joke five years earlier, suggesting Squab as Bentado’s aide. The High Lord had feigned delight at the recommendation, readily accepting the deformed Keshiri into his retinue of perfect human specimens. They’d wondered how far he’d take it—and were still wondering. Bentado never showed up without his stunted assistant in tow.

Bentado took the note and held it aloft. “*Success!*” he declared. “Our listeners heard the call through the Force just hours ago. Edell Vrai has found the hidden land Yaru Korsin revealed to us. It exists!” He crumpled the parchment in his gloved fist. “The probe is done. It’s time for the strike!”

Hilts looked at his wife. Her sources had told her the same thing earlier in the day, but it was nothing to get excited about yet. “We should wait until Edell gets back.”

“Grand Lord, most of the airships are ready. My crews are staffed and waiting. You agreed, if he found anything at all, it was worth conquering with a full force!” Bentado turned to face his troops. “We await your command—to *strike!*”

“You said that.”

Rubbing her husband’s shoulders over the chair back, Iliana smirked. “He’s not telling you the *rest*, Grand Lord. My people were listening, too. Only one clear message arrived. But there were other emotions sensed later. Surprise. Shock. Confusion.” She stopped rubbing. “And then, nothing.”

Bentado faced Iliana and raised his stump of a left arm; she’d caused the wound, half a century earlier. “They’ve found a whole new world, *consort*. There’s probably much for them to wonder at—and they’re likely confused about what to do next. Edell Vrai is no warrior,” he said. “Respected, yes, as a High Lord should be. But still a talented tinkerer. He’s waiting for *my* forces to arrive, to carry out the invasion.”

Iliana sneered. “What if Edell’s crazy contraptions went down in the ocean?”

“Edell’s not dead,” Hilts said, suddenly defensive. “I would have sensed that.”

Iliana glared down at him. She’d said many times he couldn’t sense water if he were in a lake.

Bentado smiled broadly. “I share your confidence, Grand Lord. The host is ready now. The first sixty airships are inflated and outfitted for war.” He knelt, and behind him his followers did so, too. Little Squab caught the hint a moment too late and nearly hit the floor trying to follow suit.

“I beg your leave,” Bentado said, head bowed, “to pursue our destiny.”

Hilts blinked. “Umm ... sure.”

The warriors filed out. Before following, Bentado’s Keshiri companion bowed again before the throne—this time, more properly. Hilts smiled gently at the effort. Remaining until last, Bentado saluted the Grand Lord and stalked off after his crew.

Hilts looked up at Iliana and cocked a thinning white eyebrow. “We’re wasting an airship on him. That man is his own gas bag.”

“He’s in such a hurry,” Iliana said. She looked perplexed. “He should wait for Edell to return. He’s taking all his people to drown.”

“And that would bother you?”

“Not at all,” Iliana said, making for another exit in a whirl of lace. “He handpicked them. Anyone Bentado trusts is worth drowning.”

Chapter Seven

Mischance, the sailing ship was named, and it was purely mischance that put the Keshiri sailors on the water that night, Edell mused.

He and his crew had set out from the southern shore of the peninsula—Point Defiance, the local map called it—minutes after finding the boat. They'd delayed only to move Quarra and the one named Jogan aboard as prisoners. The woman had objected; the feverish male kept fading in and out. But Edell needed a guide, and thus far her spouse, if that was what he was, had served as leverage.

The timing was good: the forces from Garrow's Neck arrived just as they were vanishing into the watery night. The troops would find the place empty and ransacked; Ulbrick's body had been dumped down a cistern. Meanwhile, Edell and company made for the ship he'd seen, rowing hard against the crosscurrent to reach it while the cover of night remained.

The Keshiri sailors had indeed been unaware of the earlier battle; surprise was absolute. They fought like wild animals nonetheless. It had taken the Sith until dawn to seize control of *Mischance*, and even then all but one of the defenders had fought to the death.

Now, with the sun climbing to its autumnal noontime position in the north, the last *Mischancer* had died in screaming agony under the torture of his questioners. Edell watched from the bow as Peppin emerged from the wheelhouse, removing her gloves. “What did you learn?”

“Not much,” Peppin said. “For sea-farmers, they were made of pretty strong stuff.”

“Seems to be a local trait,” he replied, looking back to the foredeck where Quarra and her partner were tied to a mast.

“The ship was out here trapping crustaceans. *Mischance* is due to sit out here for a week before returning.”

Edell scanned the coastline. There were no signal stations visible anywhere on land, so there was no way for the Keshiri to call *Mischance* back in—and the only way they could see who was aboard the vessel was aerially, aboard uvak. “We could sit here for a while.”

Peppin seemed taken aback. “We might not have to, sir. The Keshiri have good maps of the currents down here. Getting home might just be a matter of pulling up anchor.”

“Home.” Edell looked up at the lone square sail, furled on the yardarms. Peppin could figure out how to steer the vessel, all right. She’d been on his staff for years, soaking up his knowledge of engineering. They *could* do it—and it made sense to get home as quickly as possible. It would complete the mission as assigned, and bringing back even a lowly harvesting vessel would be an achievement. It was larger than any seagoing ship Keshtah had ever produced.

Peppin read his thoughts. “It would make for a good transport—it could carry back a couple hundred Sith or more, I figure. A lot easier than flying them here.” She paused. “A lot safer, too.”

Edell’s thoughts went to their explosive arrival—and then recalled the dream from his delirium on the shore. His mood darkened. Would returning *Mischance* be enough of a personal triumph? Not with things as they were back home. Korsin Bentado was already readying the next wave. The Ebon Fleet, twenty times larger than his own expedition. Would Bentado await his return, or launch early?

He knew the answer. And he knew that, were their roles reversed, Bentado certainly wouldn’t sail mildly back home. But what more could he do?

He looked again at Quarra and Jogan. He knew nothing of the male, but she was clearly somebody among the Keshiri. The documents she carried said that, but he'd seen it in her demeanor first. She'd been all over this land, this "Alanciar." She understood how the signal station worked, as well as the various weapons here. And she understood deep in her breast whatever it was that was making these Keshiri fight so hard.

Yes, that would be something to know.

Edell turned back to Peppin. "I have new orders," he said. "Listen—and then follow my lead ..."

Quarra watched carefully as the lead Sith talked. She couldn't hear, but his thuggish cohorts were around him now, paying attention. Compared with the younger marauders, Edell was relatively slight. How had he gotten to be on the mission—much less in charge? Probably, she concluded, through shows of brutality like the one outside the signal station.

Yet twice she had overheard one of them calling him "High Lord," a term of much larger significance from the *Chronicles*. The first time, she'd thought they were being sarcastic to the smaller human—the Sith had a sneering way of talking to one another. But seeing the deference they were paying him now, she wasn't so sure. A High Lord! Were the Sith so few in number that this was the biggest invading party one of their top officials could muster?

She hoped so, but she also worried that what she'd seen over the harbor was just one part of the Sith force. That there had been more airships farther north, threatening the fertile farms of the Western Shield—or worse, passing over them to the populated uplands in the interior. Uhrar was there. Were her co-workers and family safe?

For the first time in hours, she thought of Brue, her husband. He knew so little of war, or their preparations for it. What would he have told the children, when the alarm whistles sounded?

At least one thing wasn't worrying her anymore: Unless the old guard at Garrow's Neck remembered her name, no one would know that she had been at Point Defiance. Strange to think that, by spiriting her away, the Sith might have saved her marriage!

But she wasn't the only one they'd taken. Tied beside her, Jogan drifted in and out of sleep. His ribs had nearly punctured his lungs back on the isthmus, she realized; he was lucky to be alive. Especially after being manhandled by the Sith carting him around. They'd tied him to the mast

sitting up, and she could feel his agony through the Force—and through their touching shoulders. Every time *Mischance* pulled against its anchor, Jogan seethed with pain.

He opened his eyes again. “Where am I?” he asked.

“With me,” she said, fighting for any words that would bring comfort in this situation. “We’re done moving now.”

“Not true,” the Sith High Lord said, stepping toward her. “At least, not for you, Quarra Thayn. You’re coming with me.”

“What?” Quarra strained against her bonds and stopped suddenly, remembering that Jogan was tied to her.

Edell clasped his hands in front of him. “This ... *first meeting* of our peoples has not gone well. You haven’t provided your neighbors a proper welcome.”

“That’s too bad!”

“Reparations will come later. But in the meantime, I would like to know more about you.”

“About *me*?”

“All of you. Alanciar,” he said, waving to the mountaintops just visible on the northern horizon. “I want to see whoever is in authority here, and you will take me, Quarra. But on my terms—and on my timetable.” Taking a scrolled map from Peppin, he walked to the railing and gestured. “There’s a small cove to the northeast. Shadowed by the mountains, and not under surveillance. You and I will row to it. Your military capital is several days’ walk from there, according to this. *Mischance* will remain here until I signal from the mountains that I’ve returned,” he said.

Quarra stared at him. “You’re crazy. You don’t look anything like us. We know you’re here now. Our people will spot you in a heartbeat.”

“You’ll think of something,” Edell said mildly, passing the map to his female companion. “You must—if you want your precious Jogan to live. If I haven’t returned freely in two weeks, he’ll follow the harvesters we threw to the bottom of the ocean.”

Quarra looked at Jogan. He was slumping again, fading. She doubted he’d heard a word. “I don’t want to leave him!”

“You don’t have any choice.”

Craning her neck, she spotted Tellpah. “You’ve got your own Keshiri *slave* with you. Let him be your pack animal. Why do you need *me*?”

“Don’t be a fool. I need a local guide who knows the area. We brought Keshiri along to spread their religion—a religion centered on us. But you met us with war. I want to see what else you have in store.”

She studied Jogan for a long moment before looking back at the human. “There might be a way I can hide who you are,” she said. “But I’ll only do it on one condition—”

“You’re not in a position to negotiate—”

“—on the condition that you untie Jogan from that mast. There are bunks in the cabin. Let him lie down. You keep knocking him around, you’re going to kill him.”

Edell nodded. “I can be reasonable. Move him.” Immediately his companions stepped forward to untie the Keshiri couple from the mast.

Feeling the bonds loosened, Jogan looked back at her with bleary eyes. Gratification crossed his face—and then concern. “Quarra, I’m not sure what’s going on,” he mumbled. “But whatever it is, you don’t have to do this for me. I’m not worth it.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she said. She studied the humans again. Not Keshiri, but maybe not monsters, either: just as capable of doubt, and of making bad decisions. “And I think I may have just the thing that’ll scare these Sith back to where they came from.” She looked to the north. “*I have Alanciar.*”

Chapter Eight

Keshtah was the Sith domain. But Alanciar, Edell realized, was the *true* empire.

In his homeland, it was possible to travel in secrecy in some places by avoiding the main roads. Here, it wasn't. The foliage—such trees, here!—had been cut back far from the raised stone pathways, and trenches separated the stands from travelers. Staffed way stations looked up and down long stretches, observing traffic in either direction. Edell and Quarra had slipped unseen onto a remote mountain highway in the dark of night, but he doubted they'd be able to cross more country that way. Alanciar was *aware*.

Shrill whistles continued to sound over the hills, seeming to come from all directions. He still hadn't gotten used to them. The screeches came from every populated area, louder than anything he'd ever heard. Quarra had explained them as warning sirens, generated by passing steam through colossal glass pipes. Every village seemed to have one. It was the fourth morning since the Sith flotilla's arrival, and the alarms were *still* sounding.

Aware.

Edell saw another way station up ahead and drew the hood of the seafarer's slicker over more of his face. His appearance continued to worry him. Jogan's Alanciar uniform had been too large for him, and Edell had considered changing into the sailors' clothes. But Quarra had given him the coat instead, along with a pair of shaded goggles she'd found aboard ship to hide his eyes. That, and a little work on his face, would be all that was necessary to conceal his identity, she'd said. Edell couldn't imagine how that could be.

And yet, it had worked so far. They had encountered no one in the first day and night of travel, crossing the wooded mountains northward from Meori Cove. But since starting on the road the second day, they'd seen lots of Keshiri—mostly soldiers, headed west. Everyone had stopped them, and every exchange had gone the same way. Now, at the crossroads, it was playing out again.

"What do you have here?" the armed sentry asked, eyeing Edell.

"One of the performers for Kerebba," Quarra replied, flashing her identification papers.

"Tonight? Yeah, guess they wouldn't want to break tradition. Especially not now!" The sentry stepped back to his guardhouse and nodded to Edell. "He's a good one, he is. Move along."

Pocketing the documents, Quarra turned up the road to the north. "Come on," she growled back at Edell.

The High Lord stomped after her. "What was he talking about? Why do they keep letting me pass?"

"You'll see."

He grabbed her vest and yanked her to face him. "You're in no position to be cute with me, Keshiri!"

"And you're not in a place where you can push me around," she said. Behind, the way station guard looked toward them. There were others inside, and a staffed signal tower was within sight, just off the road. "I yell 'Sith' and you're dead," she said coolly. "And probably dissected."

Behind the goggles, Edell's golden eyes widened. Grudgingly, he released her and continued to follow her up the road. There was more to the woman than he had thought.

He grew more certain of that an hour later, after a long stretch of silence. She wasn't just dour over being his unwilling guide, he realized. When prodded, she responded.

"I'm worried about my family." She looked back at him curly. "You *do* know what those are, right?"

"Your family." Edell said. "You have children?"

"It depends. You don't eat them, do you?"

Edell's eyes narrowed. "Your children weren't at the signal station. Sent away?"

Quarra simply glared at him.

Pieces fell into place for Edell. "Ah, I see. You *do* have a husband—but that strapping purple specimen wasn't him." He chuckled. "It seems that I'm not the only thing you have to hide."

She turned her face away and kept walking. "I don't think I have to be judged by a Sith."

"Oh, I'm not judging you," Edell said, a twinkle in his golden eye. "Unless it's to say that you have more in common with the Sith than you think."

The canal had two lanes for traffic, with a white towpath in the center. "Big," Edell said. "Almost a river."

"It was, once. We've made upgrades."

Edell watched as packet boats and barges sped up and down the canals, yoked to teams of the beasts Quarra called muntoks.

"How can the boats go so fast?" he asked. He'd studied the idea of developing a similar canal system for cargo back home, to coincide with the repairs to the elevated aqueducts. He'd finally given up. Fast traffic caused wakes that damaged the lining of the walls.

"Look closer."

Kneeling, Edell felt the smooth bank of the canal. "Concrete!" The Keshiri back home knew the compound—cement, aggregate, and water were in plentiful supply—but they seldom used it, preferring to work with slabs of polished rock. They kept it out of sight when they used it at all. But the Alanciar Keshiri looked to have lined their entire river system with it. "This must have taken *centuries*!"

"We had time."

Edell crossed the bridge with her, tolerating first yet another puzzling conversation with a sentry. The High Lord still had no idea what they were talking about, but he sensed no deception on Quarra's part. Edell had instructed her to take him to the seat of government, and she seemed to be complying. The bulk of the continent was to the northeast, and they'd been

zigzagging in that direction for hours. She was also becoming freer with details about her world, perhaps thinking the sights were making an impression on him.

He'd been careful not to give her reason to think that; after all, his people had come from the stars. And though years of studying *Omen* had brought him no closer to being able to replicate a single thing inside that ancient ship, nothing about the waterwheels, brick fortresses, or paved rivers eluded his understanding. The fact that they existed here, however, did. It was hard to believe the people who had created them were of the same species as the Keshiri he knew. What had made them like this?

"We're here," Quarra said. "Kerebba. As far as we go today."

Kerebba was the biggest town he'd yet seen—drab and uninviting. Concrete wasn't just for canals; the Alanciari lived in uninspired blocks of it. As the sun disappeared over a gray horizon, a depressing darkness flooded the streets. And, always, there was that blasted whistle sounding—here, louder than ever.

"I don't want to overnight in a populated area," he said, raising his voice as they approached the town square.

"We can't go farther. The roads will be closed."

"They weren't closed last night! What are you talking about ..."

Edell trailed off in astonishment. He looked to the pipes on a rooftop nearby. The whistles had stopped. Concerned, he tried to pull Quarra closer, only to be jostled by Keshiri, young and old, stepping out into the streets. Most were in uniform, like those he had met along the way, but not all. Some, he saw, were dressed relatively festively, in bright colors. More Keshiri entered the avenue, chattering and laughing. For a second, he thought he saw a human—

"Here's one!" Quarra yelled, yanking back Edell's hood. The High Lord stood, stunned, as Keshiri all around him gawked. His hand jabbed inside the slicker, where his lightsaber was clipped to his tunic. But just as he grabbed the weapon, the crowd laughed.

They laughed. Circling around, the locals hooted and whooped, pointing at the newcomer's exposed face, paler and pinker than any Keshiri's. Beneath the goggles, Quarra had applied a little makeshift face paint to Edell in angry black streaks, giving him a menacing appearance. Now she ripped at the back of the jacket, pulling it down and exposing his outfit—and the unlit weapon.

"He's great!" called one bystander. "Look at his color!"

"He even has a lightsaber!"

Cheers of delight rose from the crowd—cheers that soon turned to jeers, at his expense. And not just him now. Befuddled, Edell looked to see other Keshiri dancing onto the streets, dressed in black with their faces painted in a variety of unpurple hues.

The crowd went wild. "The Sith! The Sith!"

The masqueraders fled toward the dusky plaza, where a great stage had been set up. Pushed along with the crowd, Edell had no choice but to follow—and was blinded when light blazed down from above. On mighty tripods, colossal globes burned brightly, some luminescent substance within mirrored and amplified a dozen times. At once, all of Kerebba could be seen. And all of it, it seemed, was heading here.

The lights, Edell thought, looking up. *Korsin saw a continent in lights.*

He looked to either side, suddenly realizing that he'd been separated from Quarra. No, there she was, working her way back to him—and smiling smugly. Ahead, revelers were climbing the dais, preparing some kind of production.

"So this is why they called me a performer." He glared at her. "I'm not going up there."

"You don't have to," she said, gesturing. There were "Sith" in the audience, too, snarling at revelers and receiving boos from excited uniformed children. "Just be your nasty self."

Edell watched as Keshiri erected props on the stage. Rocks. Painted waves. A large sailing ship. Two Keshiri were joined in an uvak costume. "You thought you were under siege," he said. "You're stopping for a play?"

"Here, and in every city in Alanciar. It's Observance Day. They weren't going to cancel because of your invasion." She seemed to swell with pride as she spoke. "*Especially* not because of that."

"I don't think much of it," he said. The Keshiri back home put on lavish pantomimes, wearing rich regalia and performing in marbled halls. Patrons were rarely in short supply, as theater was always useful propaganda to some Sith or another. The troupes in the capital city had kept up their standards even as civilization around them had declined, breaking production only during the riots a quarter century earlier. They'd been an important part of restoring civil order, too, spreading the word of what Hilts had discovered

at the mountain Temple. But this outdoor theater-in-the-round seemed amateurish, the costumes not at all “ready-for-Tahv.”

He was about to say as much when, on stage, the prop ship suddenly tossed in a pretend storm. The false rock rose to bar its path, and a Keshiri woman appeared from behind it. The audience applauded her arrival. Clad in leather armor, she held aloft a shining glass staff with a glowing globe on top—a miniature version of the lights illuminating the plaza. The rollicking ship stopped suddenly and dropped flat to the stage, revealing actors dressed like the sailors Edell had seen. Seeing her staff, they cowered. A hush fell over the crowd.

“I am Adari Vaal—and I am the Rock of Kesh!”

“Adari!” Edell couldn’t help but blurt the name, realizing as he did so that eyes were turning toward him. He froze. Quarra looked urgently toward him. Edell slunk, and attention turned back to the stage. He asked himself if he’d heard properly.

On stage, he got his answer. “I am Adari, the Rock and the Herald. Savior and Lost Daughter. Ally to the Bright Tuash, legendary winged bearer of mercy,” the Adari-actress said. “Cast off from far away, I rose from the ocean to bring you tidings of fear and wonder. I am the Rock that rose from the sea, and I will tell you of the flood to come!”

Edell gawked. *Adari Vaal*. Yaru Korsin’s confidante, or plaything, depending on which account you believed. The woman who had attempted a Keshiri insurrection—and fled to a watery death. He looked around. The Keshiri here seemed to have heard the speech before. Some were mouthing it as the actress spoke.

“There are enemies beyond your ken, people of Alanciar. You cannot see them, for they are beyond the sail of your farthest ship. You cannot hear them, though they may speak their evil in dangerous whispers to be heard on the air.”

Edell grumbled in Quarra’s ear. “This is formal talk. She should state her meaning plainly.”

“It’s a ceremony,” she whispered. “We do it every ten years.” Ten years was the length of Adari’s secret resistance against the Tribe, Quarra said—and on stage, the speaker was telling of that Tribe, and its evil. The Sith players emerged on stage, from behind the same rock. The audience hissed and moaned.

Adari raised her staff to the sky. “Yes, the Sith are the Destructors foretold—but fear not! For I have seen your Alanciar, and it is superior to Keshtah, in all of nature’s gifts.” She walked the perimeter of the stage, pointing outward. “Superior in the produce of your forests—fine, strong woods for sailing vessels. The jungles of Keshtah yield little that will bear weight. Superior in the creatures of the field—the mighty shumshur, the swift muntok. Beyond the uvak, Keshtah has no creatures that will bear the yoke.”

“We *ate* them all,” a Sith jester on stage interjected, earning peals of laughter. Throwing his arms before him to simulate a huge belly, he waddled around to derogatory hoots and calls.

“Fools, fools!”

Adari smiled. “Yes, that too—Alanciar is supreme in the intelligence of its people. With flamebroth and mirror you created the fireglobes, to keep your ways and homes lit. Your canals provide transport. Industry reaches all in Alanciar!”

Edell looked across the listeners as the recitation of successes continued. Until this moment, he’d steeled himself against the sights of Alanciar; it had long been suspected the place was more advanced. But now, surrounded by the enemy, he felt great unease. He’d grown up in a Tribe that had lost its way. Nothing had been certain. It was what had drawn him to architecture and engineering as a teenager: those had rules, unchanging and unquestioned.

Yes, the Restoration had repaired much of the damage, giving the Sith something to believe in again—but the Alanciar Keshiri had never *stopped* believing, since Adari Vaal visited them two thousand years before. Scanning the faces ahead of him, Edell saw certainty.

Why wasn’t I born here?

“I will teach you the language of the evil ones. You will speak it as your native tongue, so as to know them when they arrive. And I give you another gift,” the speaker said, lowering the glowing staff in the direction of the Keshiri sailors. “The Sith tap is a power known as the Force. It is a power some of you already have, within yourselves!” As the fireglobe touched the first sailor, he ripped off his outer costume to reveal a satiny white outfit, glistening with gold. “I do not have the power. But you may—and now, you know to look for it. You are the Protectors of Kesh!”

She smiled graciously and looked at the audience. “And you are, as well. You have fought the first battle,” she said, adding something new to the obvious delight of the listeners. “You won. And you will win again. I declare this day a Day of Observance. You will always be observant. And one day, you will triumph forever!”

The audience roared in self-congratulation. Edell watched in stunned silence as Quarra cheered loudly and clapped.

An elderly male stepped onto the stage. Identifying himself as the mayor of Kerebba, he seconded the call for vigilance. “We have all seen this drama before. But this is a special time, of all times—the enemy has come. Tonight our forces are scouring the peninsulas for any trace of the attackers. They will come again, to be certain. The War Cabinet has deployed anti-air forces to the west. Whether they come again in the same numbers or more, they will die. Die like Sith should!”

The crowd erupted in shouts, but more organized than before. Fists pumped into the air in unison.

Die like Sith! Die like Sith!

It was too much. Edell grabbed Quarra’s arm and pushed his way out of the crowd. Self-conscious, he put on the coat and hood again. He’d wanted to leap on stage and kill the preening yammerers.

He could have. Others would have. Why hadn’t he?

He struggled to control his anger. It wasn’t the time, and one little depot town wasn’t the place. If what he’d just seen was indeed happening everywhere, then Bentado’s invasion force was in peril.

And maybe, even, the Tribe itself?

“We go tomorrow as soon as the roads open,” Edell said to Quarra in the shadows. “I want to see this ‘War Cabinet’—and learn exactly what that Keshiri traitor told you about all of us!”

Chapter Nine

Quarra awoke to rain pelting her face. Her eyes opened to see Kesh's sun peeking through a lush green canopy, high above. Warm raindrops struck her cheeks.

"Wet season in the jungle," called a deep female voice from behind. "Even when it's done raining, it stays in the trees. You shouldn't lie around outside like that—not without a hat."

Quarra dried her eyes and blinked. Alanciar hadn't had jungles in centuries. Obviously, it wasn't where she'd gone to sleep. But where was she?

She sat up in the mud. Behind her, a human woman in a straw hat worked the soil, transferring flowers from clay pots. She was tanner and younger than Edell, and wore short auburn hair. "Got to replant the dalsas while the soil's still wet," she said, not looking up from her work. "Quarra, right? You really ought to think about that hat. It pays to keep your hair short here, too. The arachnorids are hideous here."

Quarra tensed on hearing her name. "The Sith ... took me here. You're one of them."

The human chuckled. "I never used to take backtalk from Keshiri," she said. "You're lucky. I've mellowed since we moved here."

Aside in a clearing in the trees, Quarra saw another human working a small plot with a hoe. In the dappled light she almost thought she was looking at Jogan: muscular, serene. But still alien. "You're both Sith," she said.

"We're nothing," the female replied, rising from the flower bed to face the Keshiri. "We're nothing when we are—or when you are. I'm Orielle—call me Ori. And he's Jelph."

At the words, the sun's rays mirrored through the mist. The world went wavy for a moment. "This isn't real," Quarra said. "I'm having a Force vision. Or a dream."

"Never thought there was much difference," Ori said.

"You live in the jungle?"

"I do. Or did. Time passes differently in jungles and dreams."

Quarra looked down to see a human toddler tromping through puddles. Before he could reach her garden, Ori hoisted the child onto her hip. Quarra heard other young voices from behind a hut. "You have children."

"Three. Like you."

"Right." It had to be a dream, Quarra knew; none of the Sith knew details of her family. She watched as Ori delivered the child to his older siblings: muddied themselves, but happy. An entire life lay here in the jungle clearing. Small—but seemingly full.

"I had responsibilities like you, once," Ori said, unprompted. "I gave them up for love."

"Love? A Sith?" Quarra caught herself. "Sorry, you said you weren't—"

"I said I wasn't Sith now. But I guess I wasn't a very good Sith before, either."

"Is there a good Sith?"

"Some are easier to live around than others—but if so, they're probably not very good at being Sith, either." Ori laughed. "And no, love isn't the only reason I came here. I had responsibility, and a position—like you. I saw where it was leading. I didn't like it."

Quarra looked at the meager accommodations. "This is what you chose instead."

"This is what hiding looks like," Ori replied. She looked over at the children playing, and took a deep breath. "The problem is, the world was already running out of places to hide in my time. I don't know that there's much future in it."

Quarra's shoulders slumped as she listened. Between the children and the sounds of the jungle, it was a noisy place—but she sensed peacefulness here, something she'd longed for often in Ubrar.

"I wanted to live apart," she said, almost to herself. "I'm so tired. I looked around and all I could see were things I'd already done. Even my children—I already knew what their lives were going to look like, before they'd lived them." Quarra paused. "I guess

that's why I created something different for myself. To give me a dream to follow. I'm sure it sounds bad ..."

"Oh, you can follow a dream," Ori said, gazing back at her husband. The farmer looked up briefly and smiled back at the two of them before returning to his work. "You can follow a dream, and you can build your whole world around one." She looked back at the Keshiri. "You can live in a dream for a long time. But eventually—"

"—eventually, the world will find you," Quarra whispered. She opened her eyes.

They'd slept in a dry culvert, just off the side of the Kerebba canal station. There was no use convincing Edell to stay with her in one of the barracks her official status entitled her to. Since the Observance Day play, he'd been wound up like a hand-ballista ready to go off.

She couldn't tell whether that was a good thing or not—she'd seen what he was capable of. But it meant something that he was so tense now. She had been right: Alanciar had been her greatest weapon against him. The farther north Quarra led the Sith, the more confident she grew. It was increasingly clear that his party was the only one that had landed—and as they passed through more industrial centers, she could see him imagining the weapons being constructed there.

That didn't stop him from continuing to feign indifference, she saw. "Another ugly village," he said as they left Minrath.

"You don't fool me, Sith. I can sense it," Quarra said. "You're impressed."

Edell looked directly at her. "I'll admit your Keshiri here are better suited for crafting practical implements than ours are."

"*Your* Keshiri?"

"Of course. Who else owns them?"

Quarra let out an exasperated sigh.

"Keshtah is a soft and beautiful continent," he said. "Perhaps that's what turned its natives to art. Yes, they made aqueducts, but they made them beautiful." He gestured to a canal crossing up ahead. "If they thought about function as your people do, our aqueducts would have lasted longer."

"They're gone?"

"No, we repaired them. But if your people had designed them, we never would've had the problem." He looked away, as if weighing his next words. "I think," he said, finally, "that *Omen* landed in the wrong place."

Quarra shook her head. “You didn’t listen to anything back in Kerebba, did you? You are the reason Alanciar looks the way it does. You Sith, and the threat of you. For two thousand years, we’ve been preparing for your coming.” She looked back onto the gray cityscape and lamented. “You don’t understand us at all. *You* made us like this.”

Edell smirked. “And if you think we would regret it, then *you* don’t understand *us*.”

By noon, they reached the prettier country of the Western Shield. Things were more spread out on this bulge of the Shank, with state farms straddling the waterways, and muntok-driven hay carts rumbling along the roads. Land that had once climbed gently eastward to the plateau that formed the bulk of the continent had long since been reshaped into orderly terraces. But the harvest was near, and the sight of so many greens and golds made even the towering fortresses amid the fields easy to overlook.

Quarra’s eyes traced a line of flashing signal stations delivering news from the coast to the military capital at Sus’mintri, perched at the plateau’s western edge. The rise was just visible in the clouds to the east: a lofty natural battlement, protecting the guts of Alanciar. She felt badly for the signalers and thoughtcriers here. Jogan’s life may not have been full of excitement, she thought, but at least he had more to look out upon than fields of grain.

Since her dream, thoughts of Jogan had troubled her. His tower was no jungle refuge, she knew—and she’d begun to question their entire relationship. He was the isolated one, with nothing to do most days, but she’d always been the one to write to him. She was no doubt the busier of the two, and yet every time their conversations ended owing to some assignment of hers, it had always been Quarra who struck up the next talk.

She had imagined that since she had so much to do, he was simply deferring to her schedule. But maybe he simply didn’t care as much.

What *did* he care about? And what good would a powerful woman be in the life of an inveterate bachelor watchtower guard, anyway? She’d begun to wonder.

“The sentinel’s in your thoughts again,” Edell said. “You have trouble hiding it.” He sniffed at the air. “I never married, of course.”

“There’s a shock,” she said. “Who could live with a Sith? I’m amazed there are any humans left on Kesh.”

Edell laughed, a dark hearty sound that startled her. “I wonder about that, too! I tend to prefer building things to the company of others.”

Maybe that’s how he got to be High Lord, she thought. *He’s a shut-in. Maybe nobody who leaves the house ever reaches fifty over there.*

Social graces aside, she couldn’t help but be impressed by his drive—even if it was toward a bad end. She’d wondered after the play why he hadn’t simply gone back to *Mischance* and departed with what he’d learned. Evidently, he didn’t feel that would be enough to keep him from losing face after being shot down. It was easy to imagine that he had rivals; the *Chronicles* described seven High Lords. Was his position at risk if he only brought back intelligence?

“I have to *do* something,” he’d said again and again. But what could he do?

Possibly quite a bit. The Force flowed around Edell and his human companions in a way it didn’t for anyone she’d ever known in Alanciar. The Alanciari had trainers in the use of the Force as they did for everything else, but at root was an understanding that was shallow at best; just what Adari Vaal had been able to describe from observing the talents of the Sith. But Edell came from a long tradition of Force-use. What secret powers did he know?

Several, she decided. That they’d gotten this far wasn’t due to her ability to bluff. Edell was doing something, surreptitiously deadening the reason of those who cast their eyes toward him. She saw him as he was. Others, if not literally seeing Edell as he wanted to appear, seemed unable to focus much attention on him without becoming distracted by something else.

That would be handy to learn, she thought. But whatever he was doing wouldn’t be enough to hide his appearance after today. Observance Day was over, and a traveling actor still in Sith costume wouldn’t do. She pointed up ahead. “As soon as we reach the crossing, we’ll find a cargo boat to ride in up the canal. Enjoy the air while you can—you’re going to be riding with the crates.”

“How long will *that* take?”

“It’s the straightest line to Sus’mintri. Should just be a day or two,” she said.

“A day!”

“You’re lucky it’s this close. The War Cabinet used to meet far in the interior, before Vaal Hall was built. They’d call me in for meetings and it

would take forever to get there. It's just a couple days' ride from Uhrar now. But don't worry. There'll be plenty of time to get back to *Mischance*—and for you to live up to your side of the deal.”

He looked at one of the packet boats, slipping quickly down the channel without the aid of a muntok team. “They don't look comfortable inside,” he said. “Surely you can do better.”

Quarra rolled her eyes. “We're not going to find you a luxury cabin! If you wanted to travel your own way, you should've flown your airships higher and not gotten shot—”

Skreeet!

The sound was back and all around: the alarm whistles, coming from the towers in the fields running up the hillside. Quarra pointed to the signal stations, fireglobes blinking nonstop. The color vocabulary was more limited in the daytime, but she could see from the nearest tower the same message that Jogan had first sent the continent. *The Sith are back!*

Grabbing her forearm with one hand, Edell ripped his goggles off with the other. Urgently, he scanned the low horizon to the northwest.

“They're out there,” he said.

“I know,” she replied. The unease she'd experienced in the station belfry was back tenfold. And now the thoughtcriers were screaming warnings, too. Edell's arrival nights earlier had been a sprinkling. Now a storm was coming.

And, astonishingly to her, the High Lord seemed even less happy about it than she was.

“Too soon! Too soon!” He waved his arms to the skies. “*Too soon!*”

Chapter Ten

They appeared as flecks of tar on the pastel sky, blisters of evil a thousand meters over the ground. An ominous chevron of airships, either end stretching beyond the horizon—and another, trailing group, higher still. The ships were larger than Edell’s nimble scout vessels, with twice the number of captive uvak driving them ahead. Painted designs turned the balloons into beasts, scowling at the farmlands. And the monsters had teeth beneath: each of the mighty vosso-wood-frame gondolas came to a spear’s point in front.

Bentado’s Ebon Fleet.

“They came too soon,” Edell repeated. The bulk of the force had been nearly ready when he’d cast off on his voyage, but he’d expected them to wait for his return. His own aerial transit had taken three days; to be here now, Edell realized that Bentado must have left almost immediately after getting Taymor’s message of success.

Impulsive fool! Why would Grand Lord Hilts allow it? Edell already knew his answer: the consort, Iliana, would be happy to see Bentado go. But politics didn’t matter now, not when the ships had already crossed the coast and were descending. They’d simply flown over the shoreline ballista

batteries. Desperately, Edell looked for something to climb. Were the fortresses across the fields the only defense remaining?

He got his answer when one of the blimps blossomed brightly, and then another. He couldn't make out what was shooting at the airships, but the fireballs were familiar enough. Thunder rolled across the farmland toward them, and a fog developed all along the western skyline.

"Blast!"

"How many are there?" Quarra asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "You're the enemy. I'm not going to tell you—"

"It's not about the war," she said, clutching at his slicker. "It's about my family! Uhrar is just a few days inland. Those things could be there in hours!"

Before he could respond, a muntok-driven hay cart hurtled past them. It stopped just short of the canal bridge, where it discharged several Keshiri soldiers. While one detached the cart from the team, two others ripped the hay covering clear. They folded down the wooden walls of the vehicle, revealing a large-sized version of the weapon Quarra had wielded against him earlier.

Edell stood frozen. He'd thought it was only fog, out west. Looking more closely, he saw it was raining upward: flaming javelins and shards of glass rocketed skyward from similar camouflaged mobile units, hidden throughout the fields. Nearby, the muntok squawked in surprise as the ballista team fired its weapon with a painful *snaph*.

"Hurry!" Quarra yelled, dashing toward the canal station house. The signal tower atop it was ablaze with light and color, communicating the reports of spotters up and down the line. Willing his legs to move from the spot, Edell followed. There were more explosions, with flashes beyond the northern and southern horizons.

"Curse him!" Edell spat on the ground. "Too soon!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Bentado," he said. "Another High Lord. He wasn't supposed to launch until I returned! Then he'd have known about your fire-weapons—and everything else!"

He cursed himself, too. He'd worried that Bentado would try some sort of assault in the coming weeks; would try this; it was why Edell had stayed, hoping to learn enough to forestall another defeat. But Bentado had moved immediately, and worse, he had sent most of the ready airships: a disaster beyond reckoning. From behind the canal house, he spied a trio of mighty

airships still a couple of kilometers off. Both were losing altitude rapidly, their envelopes punctured. One erupted in flame; another lost all its lift at once and pitched over, sending its inhabitants screaming to the fields below.

The fortress across the fields to the northwest opened up, catapulting a shining cloud into the withering remains of the third airship. Diamonds again! The wreckage slammed into the field, where the launchers pummeled it mercilessly. Edell gawked. A calamity of historic proportions was under way, and if not its engineer, he was its witness. At least nothing had struck too close—

“Look out!”

Ballista-fire from the cart whipped past, nearly striking the signal station. A second later something did hit it. An airship careened past, clipping the tower. Wrenched loose, its gondola plummeted toward the canal. Freed of its weight, the shredded balloon tumbled and bounced across the fields to the east.

Without warning, Quarra left his side, bolting northward across the canal bridge. Yelling her name, Edell followed—into a stampede. Severed from their canal-boat yokes, muntoks charged along the raised towpath, knocking the High Lord heels-over-head into the channel.

Edell punched through the brackish water and yelled again. “Quarra!”

He clambered over the slick walls and ran up the steps to a canal-side cargo platform. The clear sky was gone now, replaced by ebon smoke. Everywhere across the terraced farmlands sweeping out to the ocean, the remains of airships blazed in heaps on the ground, with still more angry pillars rising from beyond the horizon. And there were figures on the ground near some of the downed vessels. Some unmoving; others running, gleaming lightsabers in hand.

On the attack or under attack? He couldn’t see, but he could feel the same emotion from both sides through the Force. Pure pandemonium. The rout was on!

“Die, Sith!”

Edell’s neck jerked back at the familiar voice—but the threat wasn’t to him. Meters away from the concrete berm on the northern bank, a black-suited Sith warrior battled an unseen enemy. Not recognizing the male human, Edell leapt from the platform. Lighting behind the warrior, Edell saw the man’s foe: Quarra! Standing over the body of a fallen Keshiri,

Quarra fired round after round from the soldier's repeating hand-ballista at the Sith invader. The warrior parried the projectiles easily with his lightsaber.

"*Tyro!*" Edell yelled, pulling off his hood. "Over here!"

Quarra stopped firing. She looked at him, startled—but the Sith warrior was more surprised. "High Lord Vrai!"

"That's right," Edell said, speaking loudly to be heard over the surrounding din. He stepped toward the pair. "What are you doing here? You were all supposed to await my return—when the rest of the fleet was finished!"

"High Lord Bentado ordered—"

Before he could finish, the young warrior spied Quarra raising her weapon and lunged, bisecting the wooden device. He spun for another stroke—and Edell and Quarra both lashed out through the Force, hurling the astonished warrior and his lightsaber separately into the nearby field.

Edell turned toward her, holding the remains of the split weapon. "What are you doing shooting at him?"

"My job," she yelled, kneeling to cradle the fallen Keshiri whose weapon she'd taken. The lavender-skinned warrior was no more than a youngling, Edell saw. "I made a deal with *you*, Sith Lord. No one else!"

Edell took a step toward her, only to be rocked from his feet by another explosion, much closer. Looking up, he saw a massive airship, the largest of all the Ebon Fleet, soaring past. Tattooed with Korsin Bentado's sneering emblem, the flagship *Yaru* careened toward the eastern highlands, its gondola smoking from javelins impaled in its underside.

He blinked. Yes, that was the *Yaru*, all right, vanishing over the eastern horizon. Seconds later, a flash of light and a clap of thunder announced its arrival—or not—atop the plateau.

Edell grabbed at Quarra's arm. "Quick, let's follow!"

She jerked away from him. "I'm not going!"

"They went east—which is where we were going anyway!"

"The plan has changed," she said, standing. Her face twisted in hurt as she looked at the chaos across the fields. "The war's on! I've got to see that my people are safe—that my children are safe!" She ran through the smoke toward the bridge, heading back the way they'd come.

Edell pulled the hood back over his head and gave chase. "I saw your district on the map on the boat! It's southeast of the capital—two days from it, you said. And it must be at least three days from here. It's out of our way!"

"I don't care," she said. "I've got to get home!"

"What about your precious Jogan?"

Hearing the name, she stopped beneath the signal station and looked up. "I don't know what to do about that," she said, her voice cracking as she saw the lights. "I can't do everything. But I've got to do this."

Edell swallowed. All across the terraced fields, Sith were being blown to bits or riddled with glass from Keshiri gunners. Alanciar hadn't been a good place to be alone and human before. It certainly wouldn't be now. He pulled the hood more tightly around his head and approached her.

"We've got to get out of here regardless," he said. He clapped his hand on her shoulder. "Fine. We do it your way. But then, we do it *my* way!"

Chapter Eleven

The second round of alarms hadn't stopped in three and a half days; they seemed to scream louder than ever. Quarra had gotten used to the headache. *Half the population's boiling water for the whistles, she thought, and the other half's making earshells for the deaf!*

But these were *her* whistles, Uhrar's whistles. Standing at midnight in the darkened streets of the industrial town, she felt pride that they'd worked exactly as intended. There had been drills for years, but there had always been some question as to whether the great glass pipes would last through an actual invasion. That question had been answered.

All of Alanciar seemed to have held up well, from what she'd seen. She and Edell had escaped the conflict by doubling back, but the battle's outcome was readily apparent. The crescent of Sith airships had been wide indeed, sixty vessels striking across a wide swath of territory. All but the two northernmost of the Six Claws had been bypassed, leaving the fighting limited to the Western Shield—a name that had proven more than topographic. The fortresses and ballisteers amid the farmlands had destroyed most of the Sith invaders in midair. Others had been driven to

ground, where they confronted overwhelming numbers. The thoughtcriers reported various Sith still on the loose, and signal towers continued flashing madly. Whether the fugitive Sith were real or phantoms, however, wasn't her problem. She had to get home. She'd flashed her credentials to commandeer a muntok cart and team. No one was going to interfere with a wardmaster racing to her home district. Edell had ridden in the back, out of sight. After three days and nights' ride, she'd arrived just after sunset.

Touring Uhrar that evening made her feel much better. She'd found her children, asleep, in the community's protective shelter—the first place she'd looked, and exactly where they were supposed to be. Her staff had done a marvelous job rounding everyone up; the family had, in fact, been there since Edell's force struck more than a week earlier.

The deputy wardmaster had seemed almost disappointed to see her. Her absence had been his time to shine. She couldn't worry about that now. Nor did she need to see Brue; with their children safe and so much glass ammunition being used, he'd probably been ordered back to the factory for a late shift.

Stepping out of her office, she looked up at the flashing lights of the signal station and took a deep breath. The cart with Edell inside sat nearby in the darkness. She found him sitting in the back, eating the food she'd snuck out.

"Your family is safe," he said. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," she said.

"Liar." He tossed a bone outside. "Let's go. This detour may have been good for you, but it was costly for me. To Sus'mintri."

She climbed onto the driver's seat and took the reins. Edell slipped back into the darkness of the wagon, his back to hers, his face out of sight in the shadows.

Rumbling across the stone path, she looked off into the darkness. While aerial attacks were a danger, the blackout—for all but the signal stations—would continue. Finally, she spoke. "What did you mean when you said I had more in common with the Sith than I thought?"

After contemplation, Edell spoke. "I mean you're moved by a desire to improve yourself—and that you despair of weakness in others. I wasn't joking. You're never satisfied. I expect that it has made you a good wardmaster—"

"Wardmaster."

“—a good organizer of others. You see what needs to be done, and you expect it done. You see a lack of ambition as a lack of respect not just for self, but for others. And you.”

She didn't respond.

“This husband of yours—I can almost see his face when you think of him. He's a nothing. He never was, and never wanted to be, more than he is. He's slowing you down. I take it that drove you to that sentinel, that Jogan. But while he may have marginally more to offer than your husband, he's just along for the ride, too.” The High Lord took a sip from a bottle. “I studied him, you know, while he was my prisoner. He may have a uniform, but he's a watcher, not an actor. You could have him, yes, but you'd soon tire of him.”

Quarra stared into the blackness. “There's more to him than that.”

“Maybe, but there's so much more to *you*. You'd outgrow him—and he'd weigh you down, like the uvak on my airships. And you'd have to cut him loose.”

“Yeah, I saw what you did with yours,” she said, remembering the massive corpse that had fallen from the sky onto Jogan. “Forget it. I'm not going to make a choice like that.”

“That's the good news,” Edell said. “Because as with airships, the larger you become, the more you can carry. Power isn't just having choices. Power is being able to decide whether you must choose at all. You can have your husband and little family—and your lover in the tower. And you can extend your authority, and have your word obeyed.”

Quarra blinked. “What, in service to *you*?”

“Yes,” he replied. “But also in service to yourself. You could be Sith, Quarra. It's just a matter of belief. You'll never truly be Sith as long as you wear the chains of anyone else—but casting off these lesser ties is the first step.”

“I'd be careful if I were you,” she said. “You Sith—and your airships—have a way of blowing up.”

Yawning, he stretched out in the back of the cart. Quarra looked back to Uhrar and thought about the other thing she'd just done. The thing she hadn't told him about.

She'd sent the message as a general question, perfectly understandable given the recent attack. What should she do if a Sith Lord fell into her hands?

The response signal from Sus'mintri came almost immediately: *Bring him to us. We know what to do.*

It couldn't have been any clearer—or more authoritative. The War Cabinet's official identifier code was attached. She imagined the imprimatur going out to all the wardmasters, now. She wondered what it meant. Surely, they'd want to round up the Sith survivors. But bringing them to the capital? Maybe the secret appendices to the oft-republished *Chronicles* told of some way to safely restrain the Sith indefinitely.

Maybe they were wanted for execution and dissection.

She looked back at Edell, sleeping. She had just enough time to get him to Vaal Hall for whatever he wanted to do and return with him to Meori Cove to save Jogan. But even if she took him into a trap, she could still rescue Jogan—and she might have the full force of the Alanciar military behind her in the attempt.

She could save Jogan—and be a hero, too, having done her job and more. *You're right, Sith Lord. I can have everything.*

Chapter Twelve

Sus'mintri had started centuries before as just another military outpost at the edge of the plateau, overlooking the lower country of the Western Shield as it spread out to the ocean. Its location between the shoreline battlements and the industrial heartland, however, had placed it at the nerve center of Alanciari signal communications—exactly where the War Cabinet wanted to be.

Until ten years ago, the leaders of the various military, industrial, and educational directorates had met separately. Vaal Hall in Sus'mintri consolidated operations into a dull brick one-story residence—inconspicuous, were it not for the colossal white silo rising next to it in the large, walled courtyard. Unlike Jogan's tower at Point Defiance, the Vaal Hall tower had multiple levels of signaling lights, pointing in all directions. The occupants of Vaal Hall could communicate with anyone, from the shipbuilders in the far-flung northeast to the guards at its own gate, just a dusty path away.

A brown-clad Keshiri guard looked to the signal tower, and then back at Quarra. He spoke loudly to be heard over the alarm whistles. "They're telling

me to let you in, Wardmaster.” He rapped at the wagon with his sidearm. “*Both of you*,” he said with nervous disdain.

The gate opened, and Quarra’s muntok team trundled inside. The doors hadn’t been closed but an instant when Edell peeked out from underneath the tarp in the back. “*Both* of us? What does *that* mean?”

“I—I don’t know,” she stammered, climbing from the seat. He had his lightsaber in hand. The long drive from Uhrar had left her bone-tired and him increasingly agitated; she’d hoped it would dull his edge in case a trap awaited.

She’d half expected to be greeted by squads of sharpshooters, awaiting her delivery. But the only things in the courtyard were her and her cart. A bad smell was in the air. Above, signal lights on the tower blinked quietly.

And the door to Vaal Hall was wide open.

“I don’t like this,” she said, not meaning to be heard.

“That makes two of us,” Edell said, slipping over the wagon’s side and thudding to the ground. Grabbing her shoulder, he turned her to face him. “They weren’t just expecting you, were they? They were expecting *me*, too.”

Looking every direction but at him, Quarra struggled for words. “You never told me what you wanted to *do* here. ‘See the country, visit the capital, meet the War Cabinet.’” She shrugged. “I’m a bureaucrat, Edell. I can’t just walk you through the front door.”

Edell stared darkly at her for another second before breaking into a smile. “No, I’m going to walk *you* through the front door.” He cast the rain slicker to the ground and lit his lightsaber. “As ever—you lead the way.”

The Keshiri in the hallway had been dead for at least a day, perhaps more. Quarra recognized their uniforms of office—a couple of guards first, followed by a mix of administrators and aides farther in. The building hadn’t been stormed; there was no evidence of a vigorous defense at the doorway. Just surprised, mutilated Keshiri. Some of the burn marks looked to her like lightsaber wounds. But not all.

She covered her mouth. “I worked with these people.”

“Not anymore,” Edell said, stepping over the corpses. He looked down the hallway, on alert. “This floor isn’t anything, is it? Everything important is underground.”

“Yes,” she said, wishing she’d dared to sneak along a weapon from her visit to her office. Edell’s malice she’d grown accustomed to. The feeling here, however, was of pervasive evil. And it was spreading.

The glow lamps were already lit at the foot of the stairs. Off the main hallway they found a sitting room, nicely appointed except for the dead Keshiri guard lying at the foot of a large tapestry. Edell looked up at the image. An elderly Keshiri female. Her thinning white hair framed a tired, almost wan expression.

“That’s an ugly woman,” he said.

“You’re just saying that because you know who it is,” she said. “Adari Vaal.” She’d stood many times in this room while waiting to see the War Cabinet, admiring the tapestry that stood under perpetual guard. It depicted the great Keshiri as she’d looked at the end, not the young figure from the historical revues. The pure *endurance* the image suggested had perked her up in the past.

Now the tapestry’s honor guard was dead—as was everyone else. The War Cabinet’s meeting room was a mortuary, all the major figures of Alanciari politics slumped under the table or across it. Again, no sign of a last stand. Whoever had entered had come in the night, and with total surprise.

“No,” Edell said, golden eyes wide. “This isn’t where he’d stay. Follow me.”

“Who?”

“Just follow me—and stay close!”

* * *

Korsin Bentado sat in a tall-backed chair, looking like an arachnoid in a jungle web. And a web, it was. Quarra had called the room the “worldwatch” moments earlier, and Edell had been certain of the existence of such a place all along. All the signalers had to be routing their messages through somewhere. He’d assumed there were subsidiary hubs—a sensible move, for reasons of both speed and redundancy. But as he’d seen the martial nature of Alanciari life, he realized how much was centralized. A message from Point Defiance to Garrow’s Neck might be a direct connection, but everything else routed through the center first.

The center was here, and Bentado was at it, looking much changed. His head bore the scars of burns several days old. Not debilitating, but obviously

painful—his bushy brows singed completely off. Red and purple stained his uniform.

“You survived,” Bentado said, his deep voice craggier than Edell remembered. “I thought it was you I sensed. Come in, Vrai. See what we’ve done with the place.”

Edell stepped inside the doorway, guarded on either side by Bentado’s Sith henchmen. Quarra waited nervously behind.

“Bring your guide,” Bentado said, wincing as he stood. “She’s the reason you’re here.”

Edell deactivated his lightsaber and took Quarra’s wrist to lead her inside. It was the room he’d suspected, all right. A large round facility buried beneath the tower, with personnel running up and down the steps bearing dispatches. Meter-square gratings in the ceiling cast light upon a raised surface in the middle of the room. There sat a great map of Alanciar, astonishingly similar to the one that existed in the palace in Tahv, except for the complex network of signal stations and fortresses indicated on it.

Edell looked at the messengers. Many he recognized from Bentado’s massive Yaru crew, but others were from different vessels. Mostly human warriors, but there were also a few of their Keshiri ambassadors in the mix—including Squab, who brought a sheaf of parchment to his limping master.

“Rough landing,” Bentado said. “We cut the gondola loose as soon as we cleared the top of the ridge.” He grinned through broken teeth. “Your hydrogen was a bad idea.”

“It got us here,” Edell said, growing more aware. He belonged here, among the other Sith—but something wasn’t right. He walked to the map, and then looked back at the room. “They’re great builders here. But this can’t be the hub for all their communications.”

“No. There are at least thirteen buildings in this city, processing messages. We found one after we landed—it’s what led us here. One of the facilities even gets messages from Force-users, if you can believe that. But all the important messages are copied here—or begin here. Once we found the place, it was just a matter of getting inside without drawing attention.” He laughed. “I usually leave finesse to others. But you can see some of my handiwork around the building.”

Edell looked up the steps to the tower. “That’s how you rounded up the other survivors of your Fleet.”

"And drew you here," Bentado said, nodding at Quarra. "We use the signal station to call out for everything, even to have the gates opened. It was one thing when we got the Keshiri to deliver food inside the gate. But the fools have been delivering us their prisoners, too!"

Edell looked at Quarra. She stood in stone-faced astonishment, her hand over her mouth. He could see the recognition seeping into those enormous eyes. The organization that had provided Alanciar its strength had also proved its weakness. He'd held some inkling this might be possible; it was part of what had drawn him so relentlessly to Sus'mintri. But Bentado had arrived first, and with the same idea. The glory would be his.

"Cancel the alarms, everywhere," Bentado ordered. Squab shuffled back to the foot of the stairs with the command. Less than a minute later, the shrill whistles above Sus'mintri stopped—as they soon would across the entire continent. "Bring everyone to a ready state, for when the next wave arrives."

"The next wave?" Edell asked.

"The next wave of Sith. There were airships left behind in Keshtah. I expect we'll see them soon."

Edell raised his eyebrows. "Then we need to get word back home before they leave. You may be able to order the Keshiri around from here. But I expect whatever you say, the Alanciari will still shoot at our airships!"

"I agree," Bentado said, smiling darkly. "*And that's exactly what I want them to do!*"

Chapter Thirteen

Edell reeled. “You *want* the Keshiri here to destroy our ships?”

“Not *our* ships,” Bentado said, looming over the giant map. A dozen miniature airship models sat off the western edge. “They will destroy the ships of the Tribe.”

“But we’re all part of the Tribe.”

“Are we?” The scar above Bentado’s eye tilted.

“We spent so much time trying to rebuild,” Edell said, barely conscious of Quarra watching intently from the side. “I don’t see what sense it makes to tear it apart.”

“Don’t play innocent. You and your Golden Destiny people were tearing the Tribe apart for years, just as my people were.” He gestured to the Sith in the room. “Perdition, Edell! You were right alongside us in the Crisis showing us how to destroy the Temple!”

“It wasn’t one of my better moments.”

“No, of course not,” Bentado said. “But I don’t propose to destroy what we rebuilt. I’m talking about a Second Tribe, here on Alanciar.”

“A second—” Edell was startled. He’d never considered such a thing.

"It's simple," the bald man explained. "There's no path to the Grand Lordship so long as Hilts lives. And *Iliana*"—his mouth curled evilly around the name of the royal consort, drawing the word out to twice its length—"she'll see to it that Hilts will live until you and I are too old to care."

Bentado limped around the map. "You said yourself the Keshiri here were superior to ours back home—and I don't just mean this waste of flesh here that Hilts saddled me with," he said, slapping a heavy hand on Squab's gnarled shoulder. "Yaru Korsin found sculptors and painters. We have found a warrior race. Builders and armorers!"

"The Alanciari are something," Edell said, nodding toward Quarra. "Truly amazing. But they're all Keshiri. The potential exists in the people of our old continent, too."

"Do you have two thousand years to train them?" Bentado snorted.

Edell looked back at the human guards by the door. They'd heard it all, and done nothing. *His* people, Bentado had said. *His handpicked crews*, Edell realized. How many had come from Bentado's old Korsinite League? Why hadn't he paid more attention?

Bentado ran his gloved hand over the surface of the map. "It's perfect, you know. A perfect solution. The problem with the Sith is what it always was. We're taught the glorification of self, and the subjugation of others. The individual is truly free only when *all* chains are broken, when no one can limit his actions by resisting his will. The perfect Sith must control everything, and everyone." He lifted the airship miniatures with the Force. The little dirigibles bobbed in the air, hovering like the real thing.

"But *effecting* that control—that is where the matter always fails. There are too many variables. Too many slaves aspiring toward something other than your glory. Too many would-be Sith working in opposite directions." With a flick of his wrist, the mini airships went tumbling across the table. "Pandemonium!"

Edell said nothing. Bentado always spoke like this. The man belonged on stage with the other actors.

"When I was young," Bentado continued, "I thought Yaru Korsin had the solution. You remember. He'd tricked the Keshiri into believing in him. He didn't conquer—he walked in and turned the key. He had the first part right, but not the second. The result was his own death—and a lost millennium. But here—" Bentado paused to pick up a model of a signal station. "Here I can do it all again, and do it right. Like Korsin, I've been

cast down from the sky upon these shores. Here, there's a working system of government to be bent to my will, glove to my hand. And here, there are no Sith."

Edell considered the words. Whatever he thought of the source, the idea was interesting. A solitary Sith Lord might never get a multitude to work on his or her behalf—unless it was already working. Alanciar was a beating heart, keeping its armies prepared through force of habit. It only required a Sith Lord to step in at the top, without disturbing the operations of the great machine.

"It's a good idea, High Lord," he said finally. "Very good. Someone should remember it for when we take on the Galactic Republic."

Bentado smiled.

"There is one problem with doing it in Alanciar, of course," Edell said. "You're not the only Sith here."

"The people in this building are loyal," Bentado said. "They'll work for me."

"For how long, cooped up here? They're human. They can't go outside or the Keshiri will spot them as different right away."

"They didn't spot you!"

"He had help," Quarra said, speaking up for the first time. "Motivated help. I promise no one else will help you once they find you're here." Glaring, she pointed toward the exit with her thumb. "And you've killed our leaders. In the bunker or no, my people will eventually come looking for them."

Edell read frustration on his rival's face. No, Bentado wouldn't have thought very far. And he knew something Bentado didn't, that he hadn't even told Quarra. "The next airships may arrive sooner than you expect. We need to begin thinking of how to bring them in *safely*. This plan of yours—it's interesting. But we'll accomplish more as one Tribe."

"Then may the best Tribe win!"

"No. We're not going to do this again." Edell shot a glance at Quarra, urging her toward the exit with his eyes. Seeing her begin to move, he stepped over to the guards. "High Lord Bentado has established control over the Keshiri of this continent. You will help him until reinforcements arrive. Then we'll work together to consolidate power here—in the name of the Tribe, and Grand Lord Hilts."

Bentado let out an exasperated sigh. “You always *were* a bore.” He commanded the guards. “Take him!”

Bentado’s thugs at the door took one step forward, but no more; Edell was already in motion, lightsaber activated. One arcing blow to both their midsections cleared the path. “Quarra, let’s go!”

Quarra bolted through the door, past Edell and his glowing lightsaber. He turned in the doorway to follow her—and screamed. Quarra looked in horror as lightning lit the dark hallway. From the worldwatch, Korsin Bentado stepped deliberately forward, his one hand alight with strange blue tendrils of energy. Edell quaked under the assault, dropping his lightsaber.

Her eyes darted to the floor, and the sight she’d seen when she entered: the Sith hadn’t bothered to strip the dead Keshiri guarding the room of their weapons! Hitting the ground, Quarra grabbed a repeating hand-ballista, rolled, and fired. Glass shards launched past Edell. Bentado howled in pain as one lodged in his stub of a left arm, terminating the electric display.

Still crackling, Edell fell backward into her free arm. She fired again, driving Bentado and his aide Squab back to cover. Her weapon emptied, she drew Edell’s fallen lightsaber from the floor into her hand with the Force.

Now Quarra led the way, helping the staggered Sith through the maze of hallways. She smashed the fireglobes lighting the place as she went; darkness would be her friend for a change. She could hear Bentado’s crew moving into the halls again behind her, but she knew where she was. She hadn’t understood all the Sith had said, but she had to tell the world outside: the system had been compromised!

Huffing, she reached the anteroom outside the War Cabinet’s chamber. Across the room were the steep stairs leading to the surface level. But as she turned for them, Edell fell to the floor, still in agony from the Sith attack. She didn’t know what Bentado had done to him, but Edell clearly had never experienced it before.

She tried to help him sit up—and remembered in a flash doing the exact same thing with Jogan on Point Defiance, days earlier. Too many days earlier. Quarra rose, staggered by a realization. “I’m out of time, Edell! I have to go.”

Edell coughed loudly. “What ... are you talking about?”

“I’ve got to warn people—don’t try to stop me. Then I’ve got to go! It’s been ten days since we left the ship. Even on uvak it’ll take two days to get

back to Meori Cove and the *Mischance*.” She tried to help him stand. “Please come with me! If we don’t get back, your crew will kill him!”

The High Lord doubled over in pain. Quarra struggled to keep him up, but failed.

“I’ll go alone if I have to—”

“No, stay, Quarra. This ... is important. Stay to help me ...”

“*I can’t!*” Quarra rose and looked toward the stairs. “I have to go!”

She was to the bottom step when she heard him call out. “Quarra—*they’re not there!*”

“What?”

“I only told you *Mischance* remained so you would guide me here,” Edell said, struggling to sit up. “I sent them home.”

“Home?” She ran back to his side. “Home where?”

“To Keshtah. To our continent.”

“With *Jogan*?”

“If he lived.” Edell wheezed. “He sure wasn’t going anywhere on his own. They left as soon as you and I reached shore.”

“*Blast you!*”

Quarra turned back to the stairway—and halted suddenly. There were footsteps up there. Did Bentado have people hidden above? And now there were voices in the dark hallway.

Behind her, Edell struggled to get to his knees. She still had his lightsaber. “Quarra, they’ll kill us both. Then everyone loses!”

Quarra froze for a second, unsure of what to do. She stepped back toward Edell, who fell against her. Feeling his weight, she looked urgently at the doorways—and then at the tapestry right behind her. Adari Vaal looked down on her, silent as ever as the clamor outside and on the stairs grew louder. She called out, “*Rock of Kesh, save your daughter!*”

She felt a tremor through the Force—slight, almost like a gust of wind, coming from the direction of the tapestry.

Quarra’s eyes widened. *Yes!* With no time to fear historic disrespect, she pulled the fabric aside—and looked into the darkness of the hidden room beyond. Placing Edell’s arm over her shoulder, she plunged recklessly with him into the void.

Chapter Fourteen

For the second time in two weeks, Quarra cared for an injured man while Sith stalked nearby. But the location could hardly have been more different. She was not at Jogan's signal station or on the deck of a ship; she was in the greatest sanctum of all Alanciar: the library of Adari Vaal.

The Sith remained outside beyond the tapestry, and noisily so. There had never been fewer than three voices out there at once in the long hours since she'd entered. There was no going outside, but there was still a chance to warn her people. For two hours, she'd reached out to other thoughtcriers through the Force, uncaring of whether the Sith sensed her presence. The Force was one communications system the Sith couldn't compromise—

—or so she thought. Between the anger emanating from the Sith and the near-toxic levels of fear that had developed among the Alanciari over recent days, calling into the Force felt like death by drowning. There was no way anyone could make out what she was trying to say. She was too tired—and too fearful herself.

And angry. For more long hours, she'd glared at Edell as he slept, recuperating from his ordeal. He'd lied to her the whole way. She knew the

rugged southern coast. There weren't many settlements or fortresses: the snowcapped mountains were their own defense. *Mischance* could put out to sea unmolested. But with autumn in the south, Alanciari mariners avoided the Southern Passage because of its rocket-fast polar currents and the spread of ice. Did an inexperienced crew have a chance of reaching the eastern ocean? And would Jogan warn them, or would he remain silent, willing to founder with them if necessary? If he did warn them, would they even listen?

Quarra had realized with a start that she didn't really know what Jogan would do. She'd imagined she knew his private thoughts, but what she actually had was a stack of messages and a few hours at his side. And she'd nearly upended her whole life for him.

And what of Edell? He and his people had upended her entire *world*. And yet she'd saved him, even after knowing he had lied. Why? She went over the scene in the worldwatch. Edell did seem different from Bentado. A murderer, to be sure, but Edell was a builder, not a fighter. He seemed to be interested in something larger. Still, were Sith ever interested in anything larger than themselves? Didn't that defeat the point of being Sith?

She didn't trust him. But she hadn't been able to abandon him, either. What was happening to her?

Quarra slept fitfully, often waking to hear the voices outside. But they came no closer—and in the morning, light entered the room from a diagonal shaft overhead. The concrete tunnel narrowed too much at the top to serve as an exit, but the illumination provided the chance to do something while the High Lord slept. She reached for a book.

She'd read the same *Keshtah Chronicles* everyone else had. The transcribed interviews with the freedom-fighting geologist about her former life were mandatory as soon as children learned to read. They were the basis—loosely, of course—for what appeared in the plays. But it was known that Adari Vaal had produced other writings during her exile in Alanciar. Some were biographical works about the Sith; others provided a detailed description of her continent. A sizable body of her work compared and contrasted the minerals of the two continents; even the most devoted Vaal scholars had trouble getting through that material. Her support for the theory that the Ancient Cataclysm severed access between Keshtah and Alanciar was the only thing of much interest there.

But the book Quarra held now was something different. The pages were not in calligraphy but in someone's scrawl. Adari's own hand? It didn't seem

possible to Quarra, who now took extra care leafing through the pages. But whether the document was original or a handmade copy from centuries later, it was something she had never seen: Adari's personal memoirs.

Eagerly, Quarra skimmed the writings, feeling all the excitement she had always gotten when reading missives from Jogan. There were many regret-filled sections about Adari's sons; particularly Tona, who had been left behind. There were a few tart passages about Adari's mother, Eulyn—and not much at all about her first marriage to Zhari. But, turning the page, she saw the writer's hand quicken, the letters slant. It was about Yaru Korsin, the captain of *Omen* and first Grand Lord of the Tribe.

Korsin had touched Adari's mind from afar long before their first meeting, and she mentioned that sensation more than once. It had been unnerving then, and every time he did it after that. Quarra understood Adari's unease, for she had felt it when trying to communicate mentally with other Keshiri not attuned to the Force. She didn't do it often because it didn't always work, and there wasn't any practical need for it anyway. As a thoughtcrier, she'd only communicated with other Force-users. But she'd tried to reach out to her husband telepathically, and the response had been a sickened expression from him. Was that what Adari felt, the first Keshiri ever to be contacted through the Force? Quarra imagined her discomfort.

And that discomfort lived on every page after that, where Adari described the jealousy aimed at her by Seelah, Yaru's wife among the humans. Mental vitriol, broadcast at her every time Yaru wasn't immediately nearby. Not that he ever stopped Seelah when he was around; Adari wrote that he enjoyed seeing the two of them set against each other. This behavior wasn't Sith, Adari wrote; this was male. But what aggravated Adari was that she had willingly placed herself in that position, and not just to gain intelligence for her resistance movement:

Yaru has a sharper mind than anyone I have ever met. Fencing with him verbally was like one of his lightsaber fights; I felt completely awake and alive. Even now, decades later, I remember waking up in the morning and wanting the next conversation to begin. Walking with him as other Keshiri and Sith knelt down was like being at the center of the world.

But I can never forget the other feeling. The way I felt that first day at the mountain, when Seelah and her kind ripped at my mind. Yaru is smart, clever, and charming, and uses those things to rule the others—and me. But he is also a chief among Sith—and that means he is vain, ruthless, and sadistic. This is a man who killed his brother for the sake of convenience. If Yaru yet lives, he has probably done worse still. This is an animal.

As a young woman, I was part of a match made for advantage. The problem is that it defines you as unequal before it even starts. Let any woman who considers a Sith beware: strong women do not walk alongside animals. Not without a leash ...

Quarra shut the book, suddenly chilled.

She understood now why no one had ever seen the memoirs, when so much else about Adari Vaal had been required reading. The leader of the Sith had tempted her. And the Rock of Kesh had faltered.

She looked over at Edell, shifting in his sleep. She still had the lightsaber. She could remove one threat, a threat to her people and possibly to herself. She didn't love him, but she didn't hate him, either—not yet—and he would always play on that. He'd already started that, all along their journey. She had a chance to stop it now.

But she also had a question.

"Wake up," she said quietly, jostling him.

Edell let out a muffled groan. "Are they still out there?"

"Yes. Three or four, I think. Can you take them?"

He sat up on his elbow and winced. "No. But maybe *we* can." He saw his lightsaber in her hand. "Getting to know that?"

"I have a question," Quarra said, face serious. "You said more people are coming. And that you and they serve someone else. Is this person as bad as that Bentado is?"

Startled by the question, Edell looked closely at her. "No. No, he is not. The Grand Lord is old—but wise."

"You like him," she said, surprised at what she was sensing. "He's your friend."

Almost in spite of himself, Edell smiled weakly. "Yes, I suppose he is. If you had to live under a Sith, you'd rather live under him—and me—than Bentado. Trust me, we've had much worse."

"The aqueducts. You said they'd fallen apart. They fell to ruin because of some of your leaders?"

"And some who wanted to lead. There was a thousand years of chaos, Quarra. If Alanciar believes in building things, like I do, you can't let that start again," he said. "You've got to help me."

She studied him—and reached a decision. *Adari was right, but I'm right, too. Some animals are better than others.*

“Okay,” she said, rising. “But get something straight. I’m not helping you for you, or for me. I’m going to stop Bentado—and put things right. I’m doing this for my people.”

“That’s the same as doing it for you,” he said, smirking. “But we’ll discuss Sith philosophy later. There’s work to be done. We have to cut off Bentado’s communications—but if we try to go to your people, they’ll cut me to pieces. Which they’ll also do if you go alone for help and they find me here. If we still had your ballista, we could shoot out the fireglobes on the signal tower—”

“That would take forever!”

“—and then *both* sides would cut us to pieces.” He sighed. “I assume you’ve already tried to reach for help through the Force?”

She nodded.

“Which means the only way to stop Bentado ... is to stop Bentado.” Edell clasped his hands, deep in thought.

This is his normal mode, she realized. Calculating, not fighting.

Golden eyes opened a second later—and looked up. “Okay, I’ve got it. We’ll still have to fight, though. Too bad we only have the one weapon.”

Quarra stood up. “No problem. If this is where they moved Adari Vaal’s archives, there’s supposed to be another lightsaber around here.”

“If there is, then she stole it.”

“Good for her, then.” She winked. “And better for us. I always wanted to try one out.”

Chapter Fifteen

“An airship has arrived,” Squab reported. “Off the western coast, near Port Melephos.”

“The first of the wave,” his master said. White teeth ground as Bentado pulled glass shavings from his own arm. “Have the Keshiri fired on it?”

“No, milord,” the aide squeaked. “The vessel is kilometers out. Uvak diamond-flak teams are heading to engage.”

“Tell them to signal when they bring it down. Strike-on-sight command is given to all positions up and down the line. We left Hilts with sixteen airships. Here’s hoping he sent them all!”

Edell winced as he watched the Sith pull out another bloody sliver. He could almost feel Bentado’s pain up here in the shaft looking down on the worldwatch. Edell had realized on seeing the diagonal tunnel leading upward from the secret archives that the concrete bunker, where so many Keshiri expected to live and work for days at a time, had to have a ventilation system. Since quite a lot of the facility was under either the brick house or the signal tower on the surface, the ducts for some rooms necessarily traveled diagonally, intersecting others. He’d seen it in some of the ancient buildings

of Tahv. The Alanciari had used concrete in this modern construction, but their thinking wasn't much different from that of the Keshiri architects he knew back home.

There was no escaping the duct in the secret room at its narrow top, but hoisting Quarra into the space revealed to her a slot a meter square leading down in a different direction. A comfortable-enough crawl space, it slanted upward and downward as it met junctures above barracks and supply rooms. A vile stench told them when they were over the War Cabinet room. And now they were over Bentado's sanctum, looking down separately from parallel shafts.

"Where's the word from Port Melephos? What's taking so long?"

Edell saw Bentado's scarred dome directly beneath, as the man looked over the map surface.

Here goes nothing!

His feet braced against the grating, Edell reached down through the Force and knocked several of the miniatures over. Startled, Bentado bent over to recover them—just as Edell brought his legs together, smashing through the wooden lattice with his boots. One High Lord slammed into the other, driving Bentado's head into the map surface. Edell rolled across the fake countryside, igniting his lightsaber even as, meters away, Quarra smashed down, startling little Squab.

Edell turned to see a black-suited crew woman dash to Bentado's defense. Edell shoved her back through the Force, but the distraction gave Bentado the chance to recover. The massive Sith snared Edell's ankle and sent him smashing downward, back-first.

From the side, Quarra lunged, holding the ancient purloined lightsaber before her like the bayonets she'd trained with. Bentado ignited his lightsaber and deflected hers in a windmill motion, made awkward by his stance half standing in a mountain range. Edell rolled backward off the map surface—and into the oncoming assault of another Bentado defender. He lunged with his weapon, impaling the attacker.

"Edell! The tower!"

Edell looked back to see Quarra scrambling toward the steps of the tower. Squab was already on them, disappearing into the heights above.

"No!" Bentado yelled, charging after her as best he could with his bad leg. "Blast you, woman!"

Edell struggled to follow, slaying another black-suit as he went. This was no good! Quarra could undo Bentado's hold on Alanciar from the tower, but she could also bring down a host of Keshiri onto his head. "Quarra, no!"

He found her gasping in one of the lower belfries. Bentado had thrown her against the wall, knocking away her lightsaber.

"Stay back, Edell!" Glistening with sweat, Bentado pointed the tip of the lightsaber at her neck. "If this purple thing means anything to you—stay back!"

Edell looked to his side. Squab cowered near him, behind the wooden spiral staircase leading upward. "I don't suppose two can play this game," Edell said, threatening the hunchback.

"Squab?" Bentado laughed. "Do what you want. I can find more Keshiri. There's a whole continent full here." He sneered at Quarra. "Is this one special?"

"Forget me, Edell!" Quarra yelled. "You stab this filthy animal!"

"Move and she dies!"

Edell breathed deeply—and stepped back. He lowered his lightsaber but did not deactivate it. "She's been a big help, Bentado. It's rude for guests to kill their hosts."

"Fool," Bentado said, projecting through the Force. Edell went flying, his head striking the concrete wall opposite his attacker. The lightsaber flew from his hand.

Bentado kicked Edell's weapon away and flung Quarra to Edell's side. Squab, recovering his wits, emerged from hiding, and Bentado directed him to pick up Quarra's ancient lightsaber. "Just hold that one. I'll take care of these two myself." Lightsaber glistening in his hand, he approached the injured combatants.

Next to the stairwell, a cable tugged, ringing a glass bell. Squab, holding the old lightsaber, looked to his master. "Call coming in."

"Well, get it."

Squab hobbled partway upstairs, where he was passed a slip of parchment from another of Bentado's Keshiri.

"The signalers at Port Melephos report that the airship has landed," Squab said.

"It's been brought down, you mean."

"No, they say it landed."

Bentado boiled. “What are you talking about? I gave the command to strike!”

Another message passed down the steps. Squab looked at it—and then looked at it again. “The message appears to be from Grand Lord Hilts, sir. He says he has arrived.”

Still woozy, Edell looked at Quarra, stunned. Bentado’s jaw dropped. He yelled up the stairwell. “You tell him that Korsin Bentado and the Keshiri of Alanciar welcome him. And tell the troops to kill him and anyone with him—now!”

Seconds passed with only the sounds of the upstairs signal apparatus filling the room. Finally, one of Bentado’s Keshiri henchmen stepped down the stairs, looking puzzled.

“Well? What is it?”

“Grand Lord Hilts sends just a single word, my lord,” the courier said, straightening and stepping forward. “*Regards.*”

Bentado gaped. “*Regards?*”

Edell looked on, confused. To Bentado’s side, Squab’s black eyes narrowed on hearing the word.

Veins bulged in his master’s neck. The lightsaber wavered in Bentado’s angry grip. “Do they toy with me?” He turned, looming over his prisoners. “Is this some kind of—”

Thunk!

Bentado’s eyes widened obscenely as the lightsaber thrust into his back found his blackened heart. He fell first onto his knees, and then his face.

Little Squab looked down at his master’s motionless form. Kneeling, the gnarled Keshiri deactivated Adari Vaal’s stolen weapon and disarmed his dead master.

Edell could barely speak. “Squab?”

“I’m sure the Hilts family has a better greeting for *you*, High Lord Vrai.” The hunchback bowed and passed Edell the weapons. “And I’m sure they would like to deliver it in person.”

Chapter Sixteen

The white airship sat grandly over the Sus'mintri parade grounds. The same size as *Yaru, Good Omen* differed in practically every other regard. In place of the dark, fearsome design, the golden inlay in the canvas traced the image of a mighty avian creature, its beak curling into a happy smile. Jewels and tassels dangled from the envelope. Silken bunting surrounded the enclosed gondola, giving the appearance that a puffy cloud had descended from the sky to hover just meters over the amassed Keshiri army, standing at attention.

Quarra stood at the receiving stand alongside Edell, who waited expectantly—and openly—amid the surviving city leaders. He seemed to look on the airship with absolute delight. “That’s the royal vehicle you were working on?” she asked.

“Yes. But they’ve made some changes to the exterior,” he said. “They worked fast.”

It had already stopped once in Port Melephos, descending first at sea shy of the range of the Keshiri ballistae. A passenger had then emerged on the

forward balcony to hail the uvak-riding defenders—the same passenger who now emerged in the same place. Quarra already knew who it was.

Jogan Halder stood at the railing, wearing his Alanciar military uniform and seemingly unbowed by his injuries. “Keshiri of Alanciar,” he yelled. “I have been beyond the ocean. Let me tell you what I have seen!”

A hush fell over the regiments.

“I was taken from our shores by these beings—these humans, who have been described to us as the Sith. I did not go willingly, and whatever happened, I was determined to protect Alanciar.

“I was blindfolded soon after the *Mischance* sighted land, but I had time to see a lush country ahead, like the one described by Adari Vaal. I was rushed inland in a wheeled cart, while some of my captors went ahead and were joined by others.” He clapped his hands on the railing. “Again, I was determined to say nothing, no matter what torture they brought!”

His expression softened. “But then we reached the smooth stone paths of a city—and I was released. And I mean *completely* released, allowed to walk freely through the streets. And what streets! A magnificent, shining city with glass spires rising to the sky, more beautiful than anything I’ve ever seen. And the city was alive—with nothing but *Keshiri*!”

A murmur arose from the crowd. “I know what you’re saying now, because I thought it, too. The Herald told us ages ago that the land wasn’t really theirs, and that the Keshiri weren’t really free. But I didn’t see the humans anywhere. Even those who had been my captors vanished soon after my release.

“I didn’t want to talk to these Keshiri. They look like us, but we know they’re living under tyranny. How like us could they be?” He spread his hands theatrically. “But I didn’t see any tyranny. I saw craftspeople, spending their days not at hard labor, but making art in the streets. Painting. Sculpting. Music and singing of the sort we save for holidays—right there in the open plazas. I thought it was a festival, and that the humans had staged it to deceive me. As the hours passed, I realized this was how they lived.

“Keshiri artisans greeted me. Recognizing I was a foreigner from my uniform, they asked about my land. Again, I said nothing. But they happily told me of theirs, confirming that the sights I was seeing were normal. I asked where the humans were. They pointed to what they called the capitol, an ancient marble building augmented with glass towers. It was the refuge, they said, of the *Protectors*!”

This time, a loud rumble came from the crowd. Jogan placed his hands before him, palms open. “Yes, yes, I know. The Herald warned us that the Sith had fooled the people of Keshtah into thinking they were the Protectors of legend. I objected to the term, tried to tell them that they’d been fooled. But they didn’t argue. Instead, they allowed me to continue around the city—called Tahv, just as Adari had described—to speak to whomever I wanted.

“Convinced that they really felt as they said, I tried to change their minds. I described Alanciar, and how we’d prepared for the coming of the Sith. I described how we’ve lived, and everything we’ve done. And the response,” Jogan said, “was *pity*.” His voice rose as he spoke. “Pity, over so many years lost to worry, to fear over an existential threat. Pity, over so many lives spent in drudgery, rather than craft. And pity, that we had never known the *humans*, with their wisdom from the stars. Humans whom I was told did *not* lord over the Keshiri, but rather stayed always inside their capitol in quiet contemplation.

“I asked to be taken to the capitol, to see for myself. They took me willingly—and I was welcomed inside. There, indeed, were the humans we call Sith. Unarmed, and in meditation. I was led to a chamber where their ruling circle sat, no man or woman ranked above any other.”

There’s art in the telling, Quarra thought. Just like in those sheaves of messages he sent her for months. It was what had attracted her to him in the first place. He certainly had everyone’s attention now.

“I didn’t want to speak,” Jogan said, “and so *they* spoke, welcoming me to Keshtah and apologizing for the method of my arrival. There I was told the same tale of their people’s landing on Kesh that Adari told, more or less. They knew of Adari Vaal—and said she was not wrong in her warnings. There *were* evil ones among their number in those early days: servants of the Destructors, in hiding!”

The crowd rumbled anxiously. “They were aware of the danger Adari feared, and put down those dark beings the day that she left their continent for ours. Had Adari waited but another day—*just one more day!*” Jogan stopped, his throat dry. All stood silent as they waited for him to continue. “In just another day, all those that Adari feared would have been destroyed, and her warning, meaningless!”

A collective cry came from the forces. *No! No!*

"Yes, that's what they said. Everything we've done has been for nothing. I didn't believe it, didn't *want* to believe it. But they had more news. I was told that *now*, two thousand years later, a vile servant of the Destructors had risen again from their number, threatening all life. Driven from Keshtah, he built airships and set out in search of someplace else to conquer."

"The warriors in black!" came a call from the crowd.

"Yes," Jogan replied. "I now know they were attacking here, even as I was visiting there!" Murmurs increasing in volume, he pressed on. "I asked about the first airships we saw—those of Edell Vrai, whose warriors accosted and kidnapped me. The human councilors told me that Vrai was a trusted friend, who had come in search of the criminals. Startled by the swiftness and technological power of our defense, Vrai feared that we served the Destructors, too. And that, my friends, is why they brought me to Keshtah. They had to know that *we* were not the vile enemies of legend!

"That's when I spoke at last, telling them that we were on the side of good, that we would resist any evil that came our way. We weren't deserving of their wrath. No, not Alanciar!"

"Jogan saved us all!" came a cry from the masses.

"And the humans—the Sith—were glad of it. And they offered to help!"

A cheer went up, and Quarra's eyes widened with realization. *He's the new Herald.* Jogan was the new Adari, only this one told tales pleasing to the Sith!

Quarra looked into the crowd of listeners, urgently scanning face after face. They were taking Jogan seriously. It was an incredible tale—but he was one of their own.

Well, so am I, she thought. And she had a story to tell, too.

Casting a surreptitious glance at Edell, Quarra turned toward the railing. She'd felt a paralysis since the moment in the tower over Vaal Hall, when Edell reasserted control over Bentado's crew and the signaling devices. There'd been no chance to warn anyone. But here was the better part of an Alanciari legion, just footsteps away from the receiving stand. Maybe it wasn't all over. Edell would try to silence her, but it would put an end to this show, while there was still some doubt—

"But don't take it from me," Jogan said, stepping aside to allow a new figure onto the balcony. "There's someone you should all meet!"

A flush of white appeared at the railing. An ancient human male, clad in a cloak of gem-festooned feathers and wearing a sharp beak, raised his arm—

wings and looked to the sky. Recognizing the Bright Tuash, legendary avian creature of their myths, the crowd gasped.

Only Edell, gawking, laughed aloud. Incredulous, he looked at Quarra. *“Grand Lord Hilts!”*

“People of Alanciar, I have come to you as the Kesh-born minion of the Bright Tuash,” the old man said. “I am more than two thousand years old. The humans are among my children—and so are you. Your herald, Adari Vaal, was my Keshiri daughter. Well meaning—but lacking in understanding.” He clapped a feathered arm on Jogan’s shoulder. “This son of Alanciar spoke true. There *were* servants of the Destructors among my people—but they were not all of my people. We had cast them out!

“When you so kindly welcomed me at Port Melephos, my heart rose—until I received the sad story that the renegades had struck here already, killing your great leaders.” He bowed his head sadly.

The fact was already known to the audience, but the human’s show of remorse commanded the attention of all. Hilts squinted toward the reviewing stand and pointed. “But the evil ones and their leader have been put down, thanks to the efforts of one of my agents, working in concert with one of your well-trained Alanciari!”

Thousands of eyes turned toward Edell and Quarra. The defeat of Bentado was known, too—but many marveled to see the two together. *A human, secretly working in Alanciar to defeat the Destructors!*

“My people feel responsible for all that has happened. In the coming days, relief workers will arrive. Human and Keshiri, dressed in white, to help put right the damage—and to build bridges between our worlds.” Applause already beginning, Bird-Hilts raised his wings. “Together, may we understand each other—and make for a better Kesh for all of us!”

The crowd roared its approval. Quarra looked around. There were Force-users here, studying the old man as she was. But no one had raised an alarm.

“They sense no malice in him,” Edell said. “He never had any for you.”

“There’s still deception,” she said.

“Maybe these people are ready to be deceived. They’re like one of your ballistae. They’ve been cocked for years, waiting to go off. Now that they’ve fired, they’re ready for something else—even a pretty story.”

She looked up. Yes, Jogan had given it to them. What could she say now?

The blimp descended now, allowing her onetime correspondent to open the gate to the ground. “There’s more to my story, but I need to get to a

signal station. This story needs to be told to *everyone*. And if you don't mind," he said, smiling broadly, "I'd like to be the one to send it!"

Jogan stepped from the gondola into the crowd. Quarra descended from the receiving stand but couldn't get near him, so mobbed was he with curious Keshiri. She dashed along, trying in vain to catch up with the moving crowd before hopping on top of a stone retaining wall. "Jogan!" she yelled.

Jogan looked left and right before spotting her. Grinning, he pointed to her with one hand and himself with another. *We'll talk*, he mouthed, before being swept toward the signal station at the edge of the parade grounds.

Edell smiled. "Grand Lord, welcome."

The Alanciari listeners had pulled back and were now meeting in large groups with the Keshiri ambassadors from the *Good Omen*. Hilts had brought no other humans, but they would be along in vessels to come. The aged Grand Lord brought Edell close for an embrace—and then spoke, cracked lips to the younger man's ear. "That was the worst blasted thing I've ever done," he said, waving the beak.

"The costume, or riding on the airship?"

"Both."

Edell looked back at the massive vessel. No one had ever known the Grand Lord to ride an uvak. "It does make flight available to those who can't ride. We could do a lot with them—"

"The people of Kesh are puffed up enough, my boy," Hilts said, fluffing the feathers of his cloak. "It's no way to tie together an empire. They have more of the sea vessels?"

"In the harbors. We don't know how many can make the transit, but that's because they simply haven't tried," he said. "Obviously Peppin and the *Mischance* made it."

"Of course. I was hoping to see you with them—but they told me you had scouted ahead. Good thing, that," he said. "And good thing you sent us that talkative fellow, and his reading collection. It was a lot of romantic claptrap, mostly—but he also had a copy of *this*." He pulled forth a volume from inside the cloak. "His copy of the *Keshtab Chronicles*. This book told us what we were up against: everything the Alanciari knew about us."

"Adari Vaal's testament," Edell said, shaking his head. "The Keshiri runaway did a lot of damage."

“Not as much as you might think,” Hilts said, smiling. “You people snicker at me and my histories. But history is important. It can be a *weapon*—for both sides. Your lieutenant read it during the crossing, and flew ahead with it to Tahv when she reached shore. It was clear that the Keshiri in Alanciar had once been like ours in the beginning—right down to the same myth of the Protectors and the Destructors. And now, like then”—he patted the beak—“it was simply a matter of convincing them of who we were in the story. And that meant also choosing a role for Bentado.”

“But Bentado’s fleet must have already left by then!”

“And there was no recalling the headstrong fool. We knew his invaders would give the Alanciari the fight they’d been waiting for—a fight they’d probably win. So we used that. He and his ships and people *looked* like the face of evil. We had to look like something else,” Hilts said, slyly. “Luckily, you’d sent us a test subject.”

By the time the cart with Jogan reached Tahv, Hilts explained, the Tribe had withdrawn from public view, putting its most fervently loyal Keshiri on the streets. Once their new ambassador had been convinced, it was a simple matter of assuming a pleasing shape for the Alanciari at large.

“Bentado’s team looked like what they were afraid of. But I am a kindly old man.”

“Wearing a coat of white feathers!”

“The things I do for the Tribe,” Hilts said. He squinted. “I read your signals about Bentado turning. Well, that was only a matter of time. I’m glad you were here to take care of him.”

“I started—but Squab finished him.”

The old man pushed a feather from his face and smiled. “Loyal little Squab—another idea of Iliana’s. There’s a word of advice for you, my lad. When a Grand Lord of the Sith sends his regards—run!”

Edell laughed. But as he thought on it, his expression changed to a frown. “It could all begin again, Grand Lord. The Sith infighting. Our mission is done.”

“Is it?” Hilts shook his head. “Capturing new slaves isn’t victory. Any lout with a blade can do that, like the original Sith did to our Tapani ancestors. But bringing them into your service willingly? Now, *that’s* something. It’s going to take all of our efforts, together. That’s what Yaru Korsin thought, and it’s good enough for me.”

“You’re right, of course.”

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“Of course I am. I’m old.” Hilts drew his protégé closer and took his arm.
“Here, let me tell you about the history I’m working on ...”

Chapter Seventeen

Many wanted to meet the leader of the misunderstood humans, but Quarra hadn't stayed to greet the Grand Lord. Edell figured she'd gone after Jogan, but no one on the parade grounds had seen her.

He'd later learned she'd gone to help with the cleanup at Vaal Hall. Squab and Bentado's surviving Keshiri, now under Edell's direction, had held the all-important signal tower until the white-suited human advisers arrived. Just days after Jogan's Testament, there were several in the streets of Sus'mintri, appearing kind and helpful. Edell moved freely on the streets in his own white togs now, neither invader nor overlord but benevolent guest. The Sith had been kind and generous with beautiful gifts from across the ocean, and the Alanciari knew how to do one thing very well: spread the word.

Edell now was essentially governor of Alanciar for Hilts, but it would take years of smiling cooperation for the rule to be fully accepted and openly acknowledged. The High Lord faced many of the same challenges that the crew of *Omen* had, and in ways his job was more complicated. Every village, every state farm here contained some Keshiri innovation unknown on the other side of the globe. All had to be evaluated. Some advances would be

brought to Keshtah; the sailing vessels were an obvious choice to replace the dangerous airships. Vast areas of Kesh, like the unknown northern hemisphere, absent from Korsin's ancient map, might now become accessible. Could there be more natives, more mysteries there? The prospect excited Edell.

There was even talk of raising a couple of artificial reefs in the ocean, to provide uvak with rest stations as they made oceanic crossings. The continents had once been joined; there would be connections again.

The ships were one thing—but many other Alanciari technologies would be retired. They would slowly but firmly urge the locals to burn their ballistae, large and small, in a show of trust. It wasn't because of a desire to disarm the Alanciari alone. Millions of Keshiri under arms were too much a temptation to an ambitious Sith.

The job ahead was immense. He knew who he needed—someone whom he had quickly come to respect and admire, in a way he'd valued no one back home.

He found her at Vaal Hall. The cleanup crew was still setting the place back to its proper functioning, but Quarra was outside the courtyard wall where she'd left the muntok team. She looked up from feeding them.

"It's getting crowded in there," she said.

"It'll get more crowded still. And busy. You saw your sentry friend?"

"Briefly." She set down the feed bucket. "Looks like he'll be busy, too."

"He'll have a place of honor in our society, as our first visitor from Alanciar." Edell looked at the alabaster tower, rising above the courtyard wall. "Jogan won't be trusted blindly, as was Adari Vaal. In a sense, you might say we took him in trade for her."

Quarra didn't respond. She fastened a saddlebag to one of the muntoks and detached him from the cart.

Edell stepped toward her. "You could join him, of course—or do something else. Grand Lord Hilts is impressed by the Force tradition in the people here. Self-taught, and all. He's always wanted to bring Keshiri into the Tribe proper, with titles just like ours." He reached for her hand and looked intently at her. "A number of roads are open to you, Quarra."

"No," she said, smiling weakly and pulling her hand back. "Only one."

At the end of a time that had been filled with difficult, almost impossible decisions, the final decision had been the easiest.

Watching the sun set as her muntok loped into the city, Quarra understood now why she'd traveled to Point Defiance that autumn evening. She'd become a boat on the canal of her career, yoked to a single direction. However far she advanced, knowing exactly what the rest of her life was going to look like had drained her. Others in the military state had lived with the same problem for years.

But since the arrival of the Sith, the society seemed enlivened. Mysterious new prospects had opened up for all. Among them, only Quarra still felt she knew what the future would look like. She alone had seen the Sith as they really were.

Not like Jogan. Her correspondent at the end of the line was now the center of the world. He'd said they would talk soon, but he had never contacted her, and she had never made any attempt to find him. He was busy now, the onetime professional hermit, visiting one city in Alanciar after another in the *Good Omen* to repeat the story of his adventure. It had already been dramatized, with the help of actors and songwriters imported from Keshtah, into something that would replace the play of Adari Vaal. Adari had only been found on a rock. He had lived on one, before seeing the truth. Jogan Halder was the *real* Rock of Kesh.

He had never been a true sentry, she realized. Jogan aspired to a calling that hadn't flourished in Alanciar since Adari Vaal's arrival. Now it would again. The hoary patriotic plays trotted out every Observance Day would be replaced with new productions, for every day. There would be storytellers again, and sculptors, and costumers, and actors. Everything put aside during the long emergency was returning now, with startling speed. Encouraged and abetted by the Sith, who ever quietly cultivated the notion that the last two thousand years in Alanciar had been lost to a sort of collective madness.

It was a notion that her friends, neighbors, and colleagues were readily accepting. Quarra feared that, in the end, only she would remember Adari fondly. The signs of Sith evil had been visibly present in the actions of Bentado, but the forces under Varner Hiltz had been on their best behavior since their arrival. The Unification was now well under way. The plot to take in Jogan and the people of Alanciar had been diabolical but subtle, and difficult to convince anyone of. Quarra had tried more than once, quietly speaking to others she knew in authority. But all she got in return was the skepticism that should have been directed at the Sith—even from those

whose judgment she'd previously trusted. No one wanted to hear from another Adari. Finally, she'd given up.

She'd taken one last warning from Adari, though—and perhaps it would be the last one anyone ever heeded from the disgraced Herald. Adari's memoirs had told of her hope that by staying close to Yaru Korsin, she might someday learn enough to free her people. She had partially succeeded in that, by teaching the people of Alanciar what she knew. But Adari had confessed to her own personal failings, too. By walking with Korsin, she'd become the Savior for a time—honored far above the Keshiri who had tormented her in her earlier life. And she'd replaced a dull and loathsome husband with a companion who, while more menacing, had far more intelligence.

Edell Vrai had offered Quarra the same opportunity. There were so many tasks ahead, and Edell needed her. And *Alanciar* needed her, in some sense. She might make things better, might soften the transition—and might even be able to bring some of his people's medical knowledge to Alanciar. There was a lot to Edell. Wasn't it better to be companion to a Sith High Lord than a Keshiri folk hero?

No. The dream-woman Orielle had told her she couldn't run from the inevitable—and her people weren't going to. She would accept it, too. But that didn't mean she had to run *toward* it. Adari had answered that for her. Quarra patted the book of memoirs, safe in the saddlebag after its rescue from the archives. *Yes, some animals are better than others—but they're still animals. Stay with your own.*

She found Brue in the twilight outside their Uhrar home, polishing the fireglobes he'd shaped. "Looks like you had a busy vacation," her husband said, switching the devices off.

"That's one way of putting it," she said, dismounting. "How was work?"

"Pretty good." The weathered Keshiri patted the glass orbs and smiled. He was in demand now, as all artisans were; the Sith were interested in the devices. "Kids are glad to be home. They'll be thrilled to see you."

"I'll surprise them," she said, kneeling to tie up the beast. Brue ambled back up the steps into the house, whistling.

Quarra looked at their home, and then up the street. She knew what the rest of her life would look like, and she knew what the rest of her children's lives would look like. She would stay here, to guide them through—and her citizens, so long as her office existed. There wasn't really more to do.

She looked at the stars appearing in the sky. Under the Sith, they would get new names. She hoped that somewhere among them lived the true Protectors, ready to save their people.

But she was prepared to be wrong.

END

About the Author

Author and game designer JOHN JACKSON MILLER is the author of *Star Wars: Knight Errant* and the *Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith* eBook series, as well as nine *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* graphic novels. His comics work includes writing for *Iron Man*, *Mass Effect*, *Bart Simpson*, and *Indiana Jones*. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife, two children, and far too many comic books.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.